

EI-82

CHARLES W. BELLER (KALMAN BILCHICK)

BIRTH DATE: NOVEMBER 4, 1903

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RUSSIA, 1910

RESIDENCE: KARTUZ, BAREGER

AGE 6

US RESIDENCE: NYC, LOWER EAST

SIDE PASSAGE ON "THE VATERLAND"

PORT: ANTWERP

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm here today, August 29, 1991, late afternoon, with Mr. Charles W. Beller at his home in Tamarac, Florida. And Mr. Beller came from Russia, through Ellis Island in 1910, when he was six and a half years old. So, I'm very happy to be here, and...

BELLER: Okay. I'm ready for the complete examination.

LEVINE: (both laugh) Great. Okay. Very good. Why don't we start by your giving your birth date.

BELLER: November 4, 1903.

LEVINE: Okay. And where were you born?

BELLER: In a little village in Russia, which had been taken over by the Cossacks from Poland many, many years before

that. And it was called Kartuz Berezer, K-A-R-T-U-Z B-E-R-E-Z-E-R, that was the place of my birth.

LEVINE: Could you describe that town?

BELLER: It was a very, very small, little town. There were quite a few Jewish people over there, if you like, a Jewish ghetto part. There was a little bridge right near our home. We had a home, and we had a stable with a horse and a cow, and like a little garden plot that would be the equivalent of maybe a half a block over here.

LEVINE: So it was, it was a one family house?

BELLER: Oh yes, it was small, little structure. Not much of a house and not much going on over there. We didn't have any inside toilets or anything, so you had to go to an outhouse which was outside. And Lord help you in the wintertime, very cold. And next to us I remember there was a Christian farmer and he had some pigs that he was raising. And every now and then they would break through and come into our place and upset us a little bit. However, that's what I remember. I remember the bridge. I remember the little river or rivulet, you

might say that, was there. And one of my older brothers who loved to go fishing would go there and catch some very small fish. My brother was a good fisherman, broke me into fishing over here and that's been one of my biggest hobbies. And one of the reasons I retired at the age of fifty-nine, after selling my business, so I could go fishing. One of my hobbies. I have a number of others.

LEVINE: Great. Okay. In this house, who was living there with you? Could you name your family members?

BELLER: My father had left us six years before. I was about a half year old when he decided to come to America. He had a brother, they were in the butchering business. And in Russia you had to serve in the army and a lot of them were not willing to serve, so they would like to disappear before they were called. So, to avoid the draft, many of them left at that time.

LEVINE: Do you remember at all hearing your mother and father or do you know why it was they were opposed to being in the army?

BELLER: Oh, well, who wants to go into the army? Who wants to

serve the czar? And the czar had a number of cossacks that was his police and they would come in and they would raid our town. As a matter of fact, four years after we got to this country, the cossacks came in and they leveled the town and nobody was left. So if I hadn't come here in 1910, I wouldn't be here talking to you today. But my father had left at that time because my mother's brother, she only had one brother, he had come to New York, to the United States, and lived in New York, down in the Lower East side, as a young man of eighteen, and he had already settled down. And my father came here and he greeted him in Ellis Island and took him over to live in the same area.

LEVINE: Now, okay, so when your father left for America, then how did you and your brothers and sisters and mother get along for those six years?

BELLER: We had this like little, small farm, very, very small. We raised some vegetables and things like that. My mother was a real expert. In Yiddish the word is "beria". A beria in Yiddish means can do anything and do it well, a real expert. My mother could do anything and everything and she was an expert at it. So, we didn't go out and buy anything. She'd buy a piece of

cloth and she'd make anything that we needed in the way of garments. My oldest brother was eight years older than I was and he could help. My sister was very, very expert too. She turned out to be just like my mother. And she was very helpful around the house. So, I had an older brother, a second brother, a third brother, myself; the four boys and my sister, who was four years older than I was. We were left with my mother. And, occasionally, my father would send a few dollars, so we could save enough money to buy the steamship tickets to send to my mother in order to take us to the United States. And that's why, even at six years, he still has not saved enough. But my uncle, my mother's only brother, was one of the nicest people that ever lived and he was like a second father to me because I lost my father when he was fifty-nine years of age, and that was in 1929. So my uncle would see him every week, every weekend. My uncle was already a manager or, actually, they used to say "He's in charge of the Star Skirt Company," place up on twenty fourth Street. That's a big job. So my father went into the ice, coal and wood business. What is that? In the summertime he would sell you ice for the iceboxes. We didn't have refrigerators, so they had the old, wooden iceboxes, and up above there was a compartment. So he'd cut off a

piece of ice from a big cake , bring it up in the tenement houses there, put it in the icebox, and get paid for that. In the wintertime wood and coal was needed for the stove. Pot-bellied stoves or straight ovens, that's the way the people got warm. We didn't have steam heat. And with that he was only making three dollars a week when we arrived in this country. He was single. He couldn't save very much and send a few dollars over to my mother. So my uncle would say to him every week, "When are you going to send for my sister and the children?" And he would say, "As soon as I save enough for the steamship tickets." And finally, after six years, my uncle went over and said, "Bill, when are you going to send over for my sister and the children?" and he said, "I don't have enough money yet." And my uncle said, "How much money have you got?," and he told him. He said, "Okay, next week, when I come to see you, I want you to go to the bank before I get here. Take out all your money and meet me there." So he came over the following week and he said, "Now come with me. Take your money with you." They went to the steamship offices, which was on Canal Street in the Lower East Side. I remember that, that part of the story. And he said to my father, "Put your money on the table," which he did. The desks then were tables. And, he said,

"Okay, we want the mother and these children." They made up the necessary applications for them. They told them how much it was. My uncle paid the difference, and that's how they got the steamship tickets to send over, and we came over.

LEVINE: That's a beautiful story. Well, tell me now, your mother's name and her maiden name.

BELLER: Her maiden name was Edda Milkowski. Her brother, after he got settled in the United States, changed his name to "Miller."

LEVINE: Now, your father's name?

BELLER: My father's name was Louis Bilchick, that's from the Polish part - the ch. They used to say "CZ" or "CH". When we came over, on the manifest, we're listed as B-I-L-C-H-I-C-K. That's the way they spelled it, my mother and the children. So, there we were.

LEVINE: Well, tell me your brother's and sister's names, maybe start with the oldest.

BELLER: The oldest brother that came along was Moe.

LEVINE: Morris?

BELLER: Morris, well, his name was Moe, Moscha. The next brother's name was Murray. It was Morris. They have different Jewish names. Moe was Moscha, Morris was Monya. My sister was next in line, her name was Hannah, Anna, so Anna was third. Then my brother Joe, Yelsel, Joseph. And then I came, Kalman Bilchick.

LEVINE: Kalman?

BELLER: K-A-L-M-A-N, that was my Yiddish name. So, we came over with my mother, and she came over Escha, Edda Milkowsky - Edda Milkowsky Beller. But they never asked to put down the M, so it was Edda Bilchick at that time and that's the way the manifest reads and I got a copy of the manifest. I had written to the authorities for that. They sent it to me and my daughter has it among all my souvenirs in Massachusetts.

LEVINE: Good. So, then, do you remember when you got word that you and your mother and brothers and sister were going to America?

BELLER: That was one of the happiest days of our lives, because prior to that we had lived through a couple of the Cossack's uprisings, coming in and slaying some people, whipping them, and the like. Riding through the village on their horses. No regard for anybody else.

LEVINE: Were they particularly doing this to Jewish people or...

BELLER: They were anti-Semitic. Definitely, all to Christians, the Polish people hated the Jews. There was that segregation and if you had a little community that a few Jewish people, more Jewish people would join there. It's almost like a little ghetto of your own. And you had a synagogue or two, or something like that and you had a rabbi and that's how you lived. And most of them were pretty religious.

LEVINE: And your family too, was your family pretty religious?

BELLER: Oh, after my father left, no. We had our bar mitzvahs over here, when we came over. But the others had already gotten beyond the stage where they wanted anything like that so the older boys didn't even have a regular bar mitzvah. We couldn't afford it over there. We didn't have any money. We came over, we were

virtually destitute. When you say you came over without a penny in your pocket, you could say that about us. We didn't have anything except what they had sent us. So, it was an existence, not a living.

LEVINE: I see. And, had you been in school at all?

BELLER: Over there?

LEVINE: Yeah.

BELLER: At six and a half, we didn't have any schooling, no. No. The only learning we got, we got, some of the brothers would have a rabbi teach them a little something. But we didn't have any formal schooling. No. That was for the rich people. They could go to the gymnasium, they used to call it.

LEVINE: Do you remember your mother packing up to go?

BELLER: Not really. Not really. But we didn't take much along. If you see the picture Ellis Island, and you see those pictures of the people huddled on the boats and things like that, and coming to Ellis Island. What you could carry on your backs and the like that's it about it. We

came with practically nothing. We didn't take any furniture or anything like that. We certainly couldn't carry that. So it was a few clothes, that's about it. And we didn't have any toothpaste or anything like that then. (both laugh) But we have strong teeth. I have all my own teeth at eighty-seven.

LEVINE: Wonderful. I guess that's a...

BELLER: The whole family. A family trait.

LEVINE: Really. So, okay, you were all very excited about coming and...

BELLER: Very much so. It was the happiest, one of the happiest days in our life. And my mother had to go by way of Antwerp, Belgium.

LEVINE: So how did you get from your little village in Russia to Antwerp?

BELLER: They had means of getting over there.

LEVINE: Was it a train? Or...

BELLER: I don't remember. I can't tell you that. But I know when we got on the boat, I went right down to the hold. We were way down at the bottom in steerage. That's how we came across, in steerage. We couldn't afford anything else. And we were lucky to have that!

LEVINE: Now, do you remember the ship at all?

BELLER: Yes. It was called the Vaterland. V-A-T-E-R-L-A-N-D. It was a very large German ship, and one of the best ships they had. And during the World War I, the United States captured that ship, they retrofitted it, changed the name to the Leviathan and used it in the war. That was the ship we came one.

LEVINE: So it was a very large ship.

BELLER: Very large and it had a number of decks and, we were right down in the bottom. You couldn't go any lower.  
(he laughs)

LEVINE: Do you remember if the steamship company processed you? Like, checked you for health...

BELLER: Ellis Island did. They did it in Ellis Island, but not

the steamship company. I think a lot of people that came in at that time, there was an awful lot of immigration at that time. And the steamship didn't, I don't know if they even had the facilities to do the health checkups, so they would take everybody that would come along. When we got to Ellis Island, then we'd have some examination, preliminary examination. Then they put you in these pens, as they call it, the gates were there. And we'd be huddled together. But we were accustomed to being huddled because you had no room to breathe down there in the hold. We were lying or sitting around, shoulder to shoulder, back to back, things of that nature. Lot of people getting sick, throwing up. It was a miserable thing to witness. And there was nothing we could do about it.

LEVINE: How about food on the ship, do you remember that?

BELLER: Well, anything we got there would be better than we could afford ourselves anyway. So, we didn't have anything to rave about when we were at home, except what my mother baked, and of course that was always good and healthy. But over there we were satisfied with anything we could get. Give us a plain piece of bread, with a piece of herring or a potato and we'd be very happy.

LEVINE: Do you remember any food that your mother cooked that you particularly remember?

BELLER: Oh sure. My mother, she's an excellent cook. She died when she was seventy-two years of age over here in the year 1945, and she was such an excellent cook and my sister followed in her footsteps too. She would make for breakfast many times, we would have just what I told you, we would have a piece of herring and black bread. That was breakfast.

LEVINE: And she would bake the bread?

BELLER: Yeah. And we would love it. Now, for dinner, if she could get it, take one of the chickens, have a chicken for us with potato. We lived on potatoes and bread. Occasionally some chicken and when she could get a piece of meat. Sometimes the money came in and she'd go in the market and pick up a piece of meat and she'd make pot roast. It was the best, even to this day it's hard to beat. And she was the best kugel and pancake maker - lotkas- pancakes, nobody could beat my mother and my sister in that. They only had one problem, the boys we loved kugel and lotkas so much that before they could

even finish it we used to take it out of the pan and eat it. (he laughs) That was really wonderful. And anything they made was hard to describe the pleasure we got. My whole family, even after they got married and their children they'd all come to my mother's house on Sunday. We'd all gather there and my mother and sister would prepare food for the family. Now, we were in much better shape financially. We had our own home and everything else. And the whole family would get together, that was one part of the Sunday visit they all loved. Getting together. It was a good, loving family. We had two more in the United States, so we had seven children in the family, all told.

LEVINE: Wow. Tell me what your mother was like?

BELLER: My mother, one of the nicest people that ever lived. Just like her brother. They don't make them like that anymore. Everything and anything for the family and children. Never raised her voice. Always protected the children. My father was a stern man, demanded obedience. Got it even without demanding it, but demanded obedience, perfectionist, wanted everybody to do the best and try even harder and things like that. And very strong man. Virtually I feared him. He was so

strong and things like that. I don't want to do anything that's wrong because I didn't want him to hit me. But they had a wonderful life together. Unfortunately he died in October 1929, two weeks before the crash. He got peritonitis, the appendix burst. And he didn't give in to it during the night. Maybe if he had, they might have saved him. But two weeks after he died, they discovered penicillin and nobody has died from peritonitis ever since. But that's part of life.

LEVINE: Were you closest to a particular member of your family?

BELLER: Ah, well, I loved my mother very, very dearly. I loved my oldest brother. I loved my sister. I loved my youngest brother; I loved the other brothers. I put them in businesses and things like that. I try to follow in my uncle's footsteps, with everything he did for me - like a second father. And, just thinking of it makes me very emotional. Very, very lovely....

LEVINE: Close family.

BELLER: Close family, even to this day. My nephews, my nieces and the like. Everytime - half of them live here, half of them live in the New York area or New Jersey area -

and, any chance they get, we all get together. We meet regularly. We had a clan, Beller-Miller clan. The Bellers, my uncle's family, the Miller's. And we used to meet once a month. We had meetings with a repast over there. And I was their secretary and treasurer. And they gave me a watch, which I have here with the inscription on the back, Jules Jergenson watch. But I've got a lot of those mementos, and thing of that kind. Somebody would think that maybe I'm making some of this up. But this family - one of, not one of a kind, there are some others - but its a pleasure to be in a family like that, even to this day.

LEVINE: Oh, I bet it is. Can you remember any advice or any kinds of values let's say your mother and father wanted you to...

BELLER: Instilled?

LEVINE: Yes.

BELLER: Yeah. I went to work when I was nine years old. I worked for fifty years. At fifty-nine I sold my business and retired to go fishing (he laughs). But, I used to want something, and my father would say, "You

want something? Have you got the money for it?" And I would say, "No." He says, "Well, you work, you save a little money. When you have the money, you buy whatever you want. You don't buy what you can't afford. So if you want to buy something, make sure you've got the money for it." We didn't have credit, we didn't have plastics at that time. That was a very, very good thing. Another thing they believed, be a good neighbor. Do anything you can to help someone else. Be friendly. Be nice. My mother lived that way. You learn, it's inculcated in you. Probably some of it is in the genes, but whatever. And they didn't have to tell me too much. I was the youngest in the family. I was the only member of my family that had a high school education. And I graduated from high school in June, 1920. I was just past sixteen when I graduated. I had skipped four times and with rapid advancement classes, so I saved two years. I graduated from public school at the same time with my older brother who was two years older than I was.

LEVINE: Well, let's get back to the voyage. Is there anything else you remember about being on the ship, coming to America?

BELLER: I remember it was not the pleasantest thing to be down there in the hold. I remember the people sprawled out. I remember seeing a number of the people getting sick down there. I remember how happy everybody on that boat - when I say everybody I mean down below there, of course- was when they saw that Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. A feeling of euphoria that I don't think I've ever witnessed in my life, like happened at that time, because a new world was opening up for us. In spite of the fact that after we got here we didn't have much to rave about.

LEVINE: Right. What did people do when they saw the Statue?

BELLER: Oh, they were cheering and laughing and hugging and kissing and everything. And, of course, that happened when they got to Ellis Island and they saw some of their family too. The same thing went on.

LEVINE: Can you remember your first impression of Ellis Island when the boat pulled up to that place?

BELLER: Just seeing the Statue of Liberty and this island that was over there, that's all, and the water of course. That was my impression. Everything was oblivious,

except the sky, the blue sky above.

LEVINE: What do you remember about Ellis Island?

BELLER: Well, when we got over there we had these lines to go through, and they would sign you in, and then designate where you're supposed to go. And the people would wander around. My brother couldn't speak a word of English, so they put a sign on you, and you'd have the badge. And somebody else would take a look and say, "Over there," they'd point. Until we came over to the point where my uncle and my father were, and then we all, in good hands.

LEVINE: Can you describe that, when you saw your father and uncle?

BELLER: Oh, very, very, very, very happy occasion. My mother and father hadn't seen each other for six years. I really had never seen my father. I was half year old when he left.

LEVINE: Can you remember your first impression when you saw your father?

BELLER: I didn't know what he looked like. We didn't have pictures or anything like that. But when I saw him, he looks like a good, strong man and I said, "Well, that's my father. I'm very happy. Papa? Fine." (laughter)

LEVINE: Let's see. So your uncle and your father were both...

BELLER: They both came over.

LEVINE: You stayed there, did you say? Did you have there at all?

BELLER: I'm sure we arrived on August 4th. I think we were released on August 6th because the manifest said August 6th. And I have August 4th as the date of arrival. So they could have held us over for two days. I remember being penned up in there.

LEVINE: Do you remember sleeping there?

BELLER: I don't remember my sleep. So, I'm not absolutely certain. Some of these things come back to me through things that my sister used to talk about because she was four years older. At ten she had a good impression. She used to tell stories to her children and other

members of the family and recall some of these. So part of it could be hearsay on my part. After all, you must make allowances for the fact that I was only a little over six at the time.

LEVINE: Six, right. Right. Okay. Well now is there anything else that you remember, either you remember it yourself or you remember your sister saying about Ellis Island?

BELLER: Not particularly. Not particularly. But Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty are part of our existence and they're ingrained in my family to the point where when Iacocca and your group got to doing the Statue of Liberty job, my daughter heard about it. She's married to an orthopedist in Massachusetts. She said, "I got to put my father's name on that. He came into Ellis Island." And she sent a hundred dollars and said I'd come from Russia and I got the certificate. It's hanging on the wall here. Very proud of it. She sent it to me, they, they sent it to me. She was the one who made the donation. I thought that was very fine. I called her right away and I said, "Thanks, I love it." Wonderful things to remember. It all comes back to me. And then my son, who is the youngest son, he's general counsel for the American Express Company, executive

vice-president. And when he heard about it, not knowing that his sister had done that, and this was some time later, he sent in a hundred dollar donation in my name too. So my name is listed twice, on both things. (they laugh)

LEVINE: When you left Ellis Island with your father and your uncle and the rest of your family, do you remember how you got to New York and where you went from there?

BELLER: No. My father had hired a little buggy, a horse and buggy, from a stable that was right next to the building where he had his business, I'll call it, the three-dollar a week business. And he hired a horse and wagon. And they came there. We were packed on that. They took us over to Cherry Street between Rutgers and Pike and we lived at 232 Cherry Street. He had a little apartment he had taken, three rooms. It was in the back. There were four tenants on each floor. Ours was in the rear, so we faced a courtyard in the back. That's what we had. And we had three rooms. There was this big room, here. Then there was the kitchen, then there was a bedroom. You came in through the kitchen door. You'd go to the room here, if you wanted to go to the courtyard place. If you wanted to go into the other

place, you'd come over here. So we...(side A ends abruptly)

**END SIDE A**

**BEGINNING OF SIDE B**

BELLER: I was saying, five of us had come over, my father and mother made seven: five children, two grown-ups. My mother said, "Oh my God, this is wonderful, so much room!" So four boys slept on the floor together. All my father did was spread out a blanket, we'd sleep there. They had a couch. They used to call that a "lunch." Not a lunch that we eat now, but was a lounge, so they pronounced it a "lunch." So my sister, we had one girl, she would sleep on the "lunch." The four boys would sleep on the floor, my father and mother had the bedroom. And, we were there for a few years. Then, my father told the janitor, they call them superintendents these days, of number 236, whom he knew and used to do work for, "If you get a larger apartment in the front in your building, save it for me." So if something became available, and instead of a three-room, it would be a four-roomer. And this man, Mr. Linder, told him one day, "Okay, I have a place for you and your family." So we moved over there. Now, my mother said to him, "What

am I going to do with so much room? We could use some more money in this house." My father was not making much. My oldest brother had to go to work immediately and they told him, "You want to learn English? You want an education, you go to night school, because you must work to help support the family." Two years later the second brother was taken out of school, with a partial education, had to go work and help the family. So...

LEVINE: How old was your oldest brother when he...

BELLER: He was eight years older than I was, he was fourteen. And you're allowed to go to work at that time and where do you think he started? Star Skirt Company, my uncle took him up there. My brother could sew! Everybody was able to do a lot of things. And my mother said, "We got too much room." So she took a boarder in. And the boarder would pay rent. That would help us pay our rent. Our rent was twelve dollars a month in 232. Over here it was sixteen dollars a month. So she got a boarder. Then the boarder got married and they had a baby. And when they had the baby, my mother said, "Well, now I think you'll have to get your own place." So finally they moved out. But my mother, she was penurious. She could save on everything. And she

didn't go out to buy a lot of things, she did everything herself.

LEVINE: Now did she cook for the boarder as well, or did they just sleep there?

BELLER: Yeah. They could sleep there and if they wanted to eat they could eat with us. And if a bachelor was going with somebody, then he wouldn't eat in our house because they would be going over to see the other party. But, at the beginning, they would be very happy to sit down and have a meal with us because the food was delicious. It was a wonderful thing.

LEVINE: Now, how about you. Did you go right to school then?

BELLER: When I, I came here in August. In September my mother registered me in school. And, I went to school from the beginning. I went into the first class, because I was, I passed six already. My brothers and my sister, they started a little bit higher because they were older. And, as I said, I was able to skip a number of times. By the time I graduated from public school, I had to go to P.S. #2 on Henry Street until 16; then I had to transfer over to P.S. 62, which became Seward Park

Junior High, on the Lower East Side. This was all on the Lower East side. And I had my 7A and 7B and 8A and 8B over there. And then when I graduated from that, they started a junior high school, 9A and 9B, for one year experiment. This experiment turned out to be so good, the Board of Education decided to extend it for an additional year and I stayed there for another year, 10A and 10B. So my first two years of high school were still on the lower East Side. And one reason why I stayed there as long as I could, I didn't have to pay carfare to go travelling. I saved the travel time and I saved carfare, nickel car fare but it's ten cents a day and everything we made meant a lot to us. I told you I went to work when I was nine years old. I carried harness for a harness-maker. I go into the stable with him in the morning. Harness that had to be repaired, he would load me up like the horse. I'd walk to the harness store that he had right near us, put it there. Two workers would fix it, and he would work on it, too. When it was ready, he'd put it back on and say, "Deliver this to Epstein's stable. Deliver this to Witkin. Deliver this to Alco." And I would deliver it. At the end of the month he would bill them all for everything that they did. I would get twenty-five cents a day at nine years of age, to work Sunday from six in

the morning till sometimes ten, eleven o'clock at night; walk through snow, rain, sleet and everything and make a quarter. A quarter a day. When I made the quarter, I'd go upstairs. I'd give my mother twenty-two cents (he raps three times on the table), and I'd keep three cents for myself. Now, one cent I had to save, that was my upbringing. Two cents I could either save or spend as I wished. And once in awhile I would go to the movies. It was two for a nickel to go in on Rutgers Street, the Rutgers movies. And I never went there with three cents. I always went with two cents. And I stood outside. I was small and skinny, but strong. And I would stand there and say, "I got two, whose got three? (sing-song now) I got two, whose got three?" And, invariably somebody would come along that either knew me or had pity on me. "Come on," and they took me in. And so for two cents I saw a movie. Today you can't do that for two cents. (he laughs) That's part of my upbringing. But, anytime I made anything, my mother would get the biggest portion of it.

LEVINE: Now, was it difficult for you to learn English. Do you remember learning English?

BELLER: Not difficult for me at all. I took to it like a duck

takes to water. Every one of us; we could learn our English. We were (pause) pretty smart, I'd say.

LEVINE: And how about your mother and father, did they learn to speak English?

BELLER: My father was able to speak English. My mother never learned too much English because she and my father spoke Yiddish in the house most of the time. And that's how we got to know Yiddish well, too. So I speak that language very well. And English, and I speak Spanish very well, too. So, I could be a Spanish interpreter. When I graduated from high school I could speak Spanish the way I'm speaking English to you now.

LEVINE: Wonderful. Now, did your mother and father have the attitude that they wanted their children to become Americanized and they wanted them to hold on to the traditions of Jews in Russia?

BELLER: The Jewish traditions? My father would want us to go to synagogue on the high holy days; and I always went with him. The other boys, they strayed away from the religious part of it. But I always went with him on every high holiday and the like. I went to Hebrew

school. I had the rabbi come to the house for awhile. Then I went to the Rabbi's place in order to learn until I was thirteen years old. And after that I didn't care about that. I wanted to be Americanized. I want to be an American, and I want to accept my opportunities and take the, make the most of them. Take advantage of everything that I could learn. And I did just that.

LEVINE: So, when did you meet your wife?

BELLER: When I was about twenty-four, twenty-five years old. I met her in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: And what were you doing there?

BELLER: Well, when I was twenty-five years old I was already manager of an advertising office in the newspaper representative business in New York City.

LEVINE: And how had you started with them?

BELLER: When I graduated from high school I wanted to be a travelling salesman in South America. I could speak Spanish. I could take Spanish stenography and translate it on the typewriter in English and visa-versa. I had

studied economics. I felt I was ideal for the import and export business. So Friday I graduated, got my diploma. Saturday morning I looked in the New York Times, saw an ad, Raffaele del Castillo and Company wanted somebody for their sample department. I applied for the job. I got the job. He said, "When can you start work?" I said, "Immediately." He says, "Come in Monday morning, we go to work." And I worked there for four months. The import and export business went dead at that time. And for the next three months the thing remained dead. But I remember the business was so bad that we had a hundred and twenty people working for us - this was a really prosperous company. They started to lay off people, and they were laying off people and I said to my mother, as soon as they started laying off people, "I probably can't hold on to this job." I only worked until November - three or four months from June.

I graduated at that time. And I said, "They're probably going to let me go because last in, first out."

But they didn't. They laid off eighty people before they let me go. And in the process they laid off one man in our department and said, "You can do that work, too." And pretty soon I did two, three, four, five, six people's work instead of one. It was that bad. And then he came to me and said, "I'm sorry. It's come to

the point where I must let you go. And I hate to do this." But, he let me go. And when he let me go, I tried for three full days to get another job in an import and export house. There was nothing to be had. And I went through probably three hundred different offices. They all were glad to talk to me. "As soon as business gets better, we'll call you." After three days, I wasn't accustomed to not working - I worked after school. I had jobs Saturdays, Sundays, after school; always working. So I said to my mother, "Tomorrow morning, first job I see in that paper that I can fill, I'm going to apply for it. I'm not looking for a job here anymore in this field. I'll wait." And the next morning, there was a job opening in an advertising agency, Liberty Advertising Agency 149 5th Avenue, New York. Checking clerk wanted, \$18.00 a week. I went there and applied. I got a job. They said it was only going to be a temporary job for six weeks. I lasted there four years, and went up the line into three different departments. And finally they lost their main account and said they were going out of business. So I was then hired by this newspaper representative. And that was March 24th, 1924, and I spent thirty-nine years over there.

LEVINE: Now, how did it happen that you were hired by them, when the other place...

BELLER: The other place was going out of business, they lost their biggest account. So, they had to go out of business. They closed up shop. They called up one day. They said to the manager, "Do you have somebody there that could do a job for us? We're looking for somebody to replace someone here." And he started to talk about me. And I had already gone through three or four departments. And I was doing pretty well there. And he said, "I got a very fine man for you." (clears voice) So they talked awhile and he asked some questions. And when he answered them, then he asked them a question, he said, "How much you going to pay this party? What's the pay?" And they said \$125.00 a month, which was more than I was making there. And he said, " Oh, you don't want him, you want his assistant." So they said, "No, after what you told us about him, we want him, not his assistant; you send him over." So I went over there. They hired me and I said, "I think I ought to get more money." They says, "We want to see how you work. You can be assured that you'll make more money with us if we find out you're satisfactory." So that's how I got the job over there, through the recommendation of this

fellow. I went over there.

LEVINE: Wonderful. Then, when did you meet you're wife? What were the circumstances?

BELLER: I was the president of a little social club on the Lower East side. And we were nice boys. We got together. After awhile we decided we'd go over to Brooklyn where they had some nice places on Bedford Avenue. And we could rent the downstairs place and have club rooms there. We were developing, expanding and we would have affairs. Every Saturday night we'd have a show. I used to play a banjo. Somebody else would entertain, be an M.C., we'd tell jokes and dance. We had a pianola. We had wonderful times. And she came down one day with two of her friends that heard about the club. And that's how I met her. It was just happenstance. And I saw her and she was very, very pretty. (He shows a picture) This is a picture. That's my family in California. My son, the doctor. There's the doctor with one of his patients. That's the oldest son. That's one of them. I've got the other pictures in the other room.

LEVINE: So, did you court your wife for quite awhile?

BELLER: Yeah, a couple of years. I was twenty-seven when I got married. (Pause) In 1929, my father died. I was twenty-six years old. He had been sick for five years, had a heart attack from doing very hard labor. And I told him not to go to work anymore. I'll take care of the family myself. The others, some of them got married, they had their own families. I said, "Don't worry, I'll take care of everything." And I supported them. After he passed away, my wife now, at that time she said to me, "I know how close you are with your mother and I don't want to interfere with anything like that. If you feel uncomfortable and you don't want to leave your mother or anything like that, it's perfectly alright. I will understand." And I said, "No, we have no problems or anything like that." She said, "Okay, we decided, we've been going two years together; let's get, we're going to get married." She said we had a two-family house already on Pennsylvania Avenue, Brooklyn at that time. We lived in New York until 1928, from 1910 to '28. Then bought this house on Pennsylvania Avenue, Brooklyn; a brick house, two family. She said, "When we get married, if you want me to do this, I will be glad to live upstairs. Your mother can live downstairs as you're living now." And I said, "No, I don't want that. I want you and my mother

to remain good friends. So, we'll live in the neighborhood and we can see my mother regularly. But I don't want you to live in the same house with her and I can afford to pay rent in two places easily." So we got a place over in Union Street. And it was a very happy relationship. My mother loved my wife and my wife loved my mother. And we got married in 1931 in the Depression period. And a lot of people said, "You've got a lot of nerve getting married at this time." And I said, "I'm not worried."

LEVINE: You were sure of yourself.

BELLER: Well my boss had told me, "as long as I live and have a business, you've got a job." So I wasn't worried. And I was the manager of the office and he depended on me, for everything went through my desk. So, I didn't have anything to worry about then.

LEVINE: So then what children did you have?

BELLER: I have three children.

LEVINE: And what are their names?

BELLER: Two boys and a girl. The oldest, Lennie, Leonard, he's

a doctor in California. Lives in Los Angeles, got a family of three children: two girls, one boy. The oldest Marla, graduated from U.C.L.A., Santa Barbara. The next one is Mark, who was just accepted at Valhalla and New York Medical College, and he's starting his first year in medical school. And the third one, Lonnie, left last week to go to Italy to study for one year. All three of them went to U.C.L.A., Santa Barbara. Mark graduated from there. Lonnie is due to graduate next year, but they have a student exchange program and she has gone to Italy for one year. She studied some Italian here, and she's going to live there for a year. I have her address here, in Podova. That's Leonard.

LEVINE: That's your first, and who was your second?

BELLER: The second one was my daughter. Born August 27, 1932, he just had a birthday. Today's the twenty-ninth; two days ago. And my daughter Enid was born March 13, 1937. And she is married, she graduated from Syracuse as a speech therapist and audiologist. Worked for one year up there for the Catholic Church in that field. Met her husband up there. He was going to medical school. They got married and they lived in Syracuse right after that.

She's got, she had three children: two boys and a girl. The oldest boy, Brian, is a lawyer, doing very, very well. Connected with one of the largest San Francisco international law firms. Travels to Hawaii, Russia, Japan and places like that for the firm. Speaks Russian. Has made some deals for the firm with American firms and Russian firms, before this upheaval of course. That's Brian, the lawyer; got written up in a lot of papers and magazines. His younger brother, I told you, is at the University of Maryland now: that's Andrew. They had a daughter also. All three were in Harvard at the same time. Unfortunately she developed diabetes, juvenile diabetes, and died at twenty-one. So she's gone about eight years. (he is moved) That's it. And she was born on March 22nd. That was it.

LEVINE: And then you have one other child?

BELLER: Then, I've got the youngest one, Gary. Now Gary is, was born October 16, 1938. He is the Executive Vice-President and General Counselor for the American Express Company. And he's married to Carol. Carol Beller is in business herself. She used to be the president of Francis Demi and Company in New York. She's a financial and business consultant; primarily business consultant

for a number of different firms. Carol was born August 27th also, but not the same year as my son here; and they have one child, Jessie, very lovely girl. And that's what they have.

LEVINE: Is there anything else that you can think of to say about your life, having started out in a small village in Russia and coming here and ...

BELLER: Well, little did I ever think when I was younger, and not only at six and a half, but even as I went through high school or anything like that, that I would have the career that I had for myself as well as having a wonderful family like I have and the accomplishments of this Beller family. We changed our name of course a long time ago to Beller. When I first used to look in the directory there were hardly any Bellers there but there are plenty around now it seems. But in any event when they say, you know, "from janitor to owner," from a little checking clerk in this particular representative firm, from the little job I had in the advertising agency, fate and accident plays a part of your life - big part in anybody's life. If you take advantage of the opportunities. I was always a perfectionist and I went up the line in the various places. And they

promoted me. And, as a result, starting down at the bottom, working up through a few departments, finally winding up as assistant manager, manager, part-owner, one-fifth owner, one-fourth owner, one-half owner and finally saying to my partner who said to me, "I want to retire. I'm ten years older than you are. I want to retire. I think you should buy me out the way we bought out the last two partners of ours five years ago." And I said, "No, thanks." And he said, "You're crazy. You've got a nice business here. You can do very well for yourself. You're running the business anyway." And I said, "No." I said, "Right now we're represented by sixty-one daily newspapers in the United States through all their national advertising. So right now, I have half of the headaches. And you want to give me a hundred percent of the headaches." I says, "I think it's a little bit too much pressure." He said, "Well, nobody retires at fifty-nine." I says, "I do." I said, "I don't think I have to worry about anything at this stage." So he says, "What do we do?" So I said, "Well, we sell the business." "How do we do that?" I says, "It's Friday afternoon now." I says, "You go home, I'll go home. Monday morning I'll come in and I'll have a plan," and that's exactly what I did. I came in and I told him what the plan was, and he said, "If we can work

this out it will be fine." Well, we made the best sale in the newspaper representative business that ever was made. I had to sell to six different organizations before I go through but we sold off all sixty-one contracts. We got paid on every one. Started off with the cream to the first one which was excellent. And then I had to dispose of skim milk, as I call it. That was difficult, but after a month of negotiations and I wore down somebody, he wanted the balance. He was ready to take the balance - he at first wanted the whole thing and I couldn't give it to him. So finally, he took what I gave him, on one condition. He said, "You got to help me for the first year. If I call on you, if I have a problem with any of your clients, you'll come in and help me." And I says, "Yeah." And he says, in regard to that, he says, "I'll tell you what I'll do for you. I'll give you an office, a desk, a chair, you can have my secretary anytime you want to dictate anything." I said, "I don't have to dictate. I type. I'll sit down and I'll type my own letters. I'll handle anything myself." He said, "But you can have the use of the entire office." And we did that, and some others came along and they cut in, so I sold two accounts here, one account here, one I made a direct deal. And we worked it out. So, we made a very fine deal. My partner said,

never in his wildest dreams could he have dreamt we could have done that. But we did! He took one part, I took another part. We went out, we saw the people. If anybody would ask about the other part of the deal - like if somebody in Indiana said, "Well, what about Charlie?" "Well Charlie says it's okay with him, and he's ready to do it." They said, "Yeah." "This okay with you Charlie?" And I say, "Yeah, they have my blessing on it." "Well, come out here tomorrow, we're going to sign up. We're set to go!" Things like that.

And in other places they would say - his name was Steve Mahoney - they wanted to change the firm name, put my name in the firm. I told them, "No, leave it alone, that firm name has been there since 1907. I want to leave it. The Burke name means more than the Beller name, that's established. Let it there. It doesn't matter to me, having my name on the masthead." And so we left it alone and when I sold, it went out of business. That was the end of the firm. But my boss, who had died in 1936, he had left us a piece of the business, for a certain consideration, and I was the one that put an evaluation of it. And, there were five of us that started, then it became four nine years later, and thirteen years after that it became two, and then my partner wanted to make me this deal, and I decided "I

want to go fishing." So little did I think that little immigrant boy who was on the boat would one day develop into something like this. I never dreamt I'd be in Florida - here - for that matter because we lived in New York from 1910 to 1978. Then we moved down here. First, as a snow bird for two years and now total. And we're very happy, very happy. I like my existence here. My wife thinks I'm the happiest man in Florida. I said, "I'm not the happiest, I'm one of the happiest."

LEVINE: (laughs) Okay. Well, on that note, I think that's a good note to close on. I thank you very much for a wonderful interview.

BELLER: You're entirely welcome. I could talk about this. I've told my stories to my grandchildren and they used to ask me stories of what happened in the club rooms and things like that, but these stories I can write for them. They want me to keep on telling them all the time. They ask me to repeat. They love them. Well, we love the family, they love us, and that's fine. It's a pleasure talking to you.

LEVINE: Great. Thank you.