

EI-825

SARA SUTTON BENUN

BIRTHDATE: APRIL 28, 1912

INTERVIEW DATE: OCTOBER 27, 1996

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 84

RUNNING TIME: 25:16

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND ORAL HISTORY STUDIO

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

PALESTINE, 1927

AGE: 15

SHIP: THE BYRON

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is October 27th, 1996 and I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Sarah Sutton Benun.

BENUN: That's right.

LEVINE: Who came from Palestine in 1927 when she was fifteen years of age. Today Mrs. Benun is eighty-four years of age and this is your first visit back to Ellis Island—

BENUN: Since I arrived her the first time.

LEVINE: Right. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Well, I'm delighted to be able to talk with you and to do this interview and to have seen your beautiful family, who is here with you today.

BENUN: And it's a pleasure to meet such a beautiful and nice person like you.

LEVINE: Oh, thank you.

BENUN: That was a pleasure from the minute I met you.

EI-825/BENUN

LEVINE: Thank you. Okay, let's start at the beginning.

BENUN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Say your birth date for the tape and where you were born. The town.

BENUN: I was born in Jerusalem.

LEVINE: In Jerusalem.

BENUN: Jerusalem, that's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and your birth date?

BENUN: April 28, 19—

LEVINE: Twelve.

BENUN: 1912, that's right. Exactly.

LEVINE: 1912. Okay, and did you live in Jerusalem right up until you were fifteen and you left?

BENUN: Yes.

LEVINE: Yes.

BENUN: All the time.

LEVINE: When you think back to your girlhood, when you were growing up, when you were a little girl there.

BENUN: Yeah.

LEVINE: What are the kinds of things that stick with you now that you remember?

BENUN: You know, I remember the war. You know, how we were very young and we had to go from our house to—people's. You know, they had big houses to stay there for few days on account of the war. It was—we really had a very bad time then.

LEVINE: Did—how did the war effect you personally, as a little girl?

BENUN: A little girl? Just, you know, we were scared. That's it. That's about all.

LEVINE: Did you see—what did you see? Did you see—

BENUN: No, no. Nothing. Nothing.

LEVINE: Nothing, uh-huh.

BENUN: Just we were scared, that's it.

LEVINE: Now, what was your father's name?

BENUN: Joseph.

LEVINE: Joseph and your mother's name?

BENUN: Lily.

LEVINE: Lily, and Lily's maiden name?

BENUN: Myers.

LEVINE: Myers, okay, and you had one sister. Well, are you—wait, are you the oldest?

BENUN: No.

LEVINE: No. Tell me the name of your brothers and sisters as—from the oldest on down.

BENUN: A sister, the oldest name was Fortune and she was in the States since she was fourteen. She came to my uncle, Abe Myers, you know, American because my mother was American. And then we followed, but that was many years after—later.

LEVINE: I see. So—so your mother was born in the United States?

BENUN: That's right, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. I see, and your father was born in Palestine?

BENUN: No, he was born in Syria.

LEVINE: No, in Syria. Do you know the story about your father's family coming from Syria to Palestine?

BENUN: Yes. My—his father wanted to come and he was old to—to die in Jerusalem. Israel, you know. Not Jerusalem, Israel, and he—him and his brother, there were only two brothers. No sisters and no uncles, no aunts, and they stayed in Israel in Jerusalem. That's it.

LEVINE: And your mother—

BENUN: And then—

LEVINE: How did she come to—to be there in Jerusalem?

BENUN: Well, Jerusalem was like a—a drop in the ocean—in the ocean. You know, they lived the same neighborhood, you know. My mother came from the States and my father lived in Syria—in—came from Syria and you meet peoples because this was very small.

LEVINE: Right. Well, do you know the story of why your mother went to Palestine from the United States?

BENUN: Yeah. Yeah, because my grandfather wanted to come to—you know, to come to the—to—to Israel.

LEVINE: And did she go as a little girl or did she go as an older—

BENUN: Yeah, oh, sure, as a little girl I think. For sure.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: Because after many years, my mother was assistant principal in Israel in the [unclear] Rothschild School.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENUN: That's before we were born, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: Very educated person.

LEVINE: Wow, and did you know your grandparents?

BENUN: No.

LEVINE: No. Uh-huh.

BENUN: None of the grandparents we did know.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay, so you started with your oldest sister and she came to the United States a long time before you did.

BENUN: Yes. Oh, yeah, sure.

LEVINE: And then who was the next child in the family?

BENUN: My brother Joshua.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and then who else?

BENUN: Then my sister Rosie went to my sister Fortune in Cuba, Havana.

LEVINE: Oh, your sister Fortune was in Cuba first?

BENUN: She went to—no, over here in the States and then she went to Cuba for business. Her husband, you know, and she sent for my sister Rosie. That's it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and then after Rosie who came next?

BENUN: Then after many years, my mother wanted to come to see her family over here, so we came with her. That's my sister Alice, my brother Isaac and me. Three.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and you were the three youngest? Alice, Isaac and you were the three youngest children.

BENUN: Yeah, that's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay, did you go to school in Palestine?

BENUN: In Jerusalem, yeah.

LEVINE: In Jerusalem?

BENUN: Yeah, yeah, Hebrew school.

LEVINE: You went to Hebrew school.

BENUN: Hebrew school.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: Yeah, and we went to the [unclear] Rothschild School. It was Hebrew and English.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So did you know English before you came to this country?

BENUN: Yeah, because of my mother.

LEVINE: Ah. Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm, and what kinds of things do you remember about your father when you were a little girl? What did your father do? What was he like?

BENUN: My father was an—accountant. A very smart man. A very good father and—and I mean all the years we—we knew my parents, they lived like birds, you know. She's American and she's not—not from Syria and—and he's from Syria, but they lived unbelievable. Never—yeah, [unclear]. Never a word, a bad word from their mouth to us. Never. Always they treated us, I can't tell you how. That's how much we know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: Very nice parents.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: And look, she's from the States and he's from Syria and they lived very nicely. And he had money. I mean it was—

LEVINE: They were comfortable.

BENUN: Yeah, com—very comfortable. Maids in the house. He comes from a very nice family, the Suttons, and my mother, of course, I'm sure. Her father was a doctor but no license. They used to call her the doctor's daughter.

LEVINE: And do you remember her father?

BENUN: No. No.

LEVINE: No.

BENUN: No, no.

LEVINE: No, uh-huh. And—and do you remember things that your mother and father liked to do? Any activities, any kinds of experiences like with music or did they—what did they do for a social life?

BENUN: Well, being that she was a teacher, they always had company and they always had, you know, teachers and whatever and—and they lived very nicely.

LEVINE: What did she teach? Did she teach—

BENUN: English.

LEVINE: English. Wow, uh-huh.

BENUN: Kindergarten.

LEVINE: Kindergarten.

BENUN: Yeah, that's right.

LEVINE: Yeah. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Yeah.

BENUN: And never a fight. Never a bad word, a bad word in the house.

LEVINE: Do you remember any attitudes or values that they tried to instill in you as—as one of their children? Any things they taught you that they wanted you to be aware of or to be the kind of person they wanted you to be?

BENUN: That time they wouldn't let us go out after dark. We had to stay home. We couldn't—I mean, very strict. So we really didn't know anything—anything better. We just stayed home and—and that's that.

LEVINE: Do you remember any ceremonies—

BENUN: Yes.

LEVINE: Or any kinds of observances?

BENUN: You mean in Israel?

LEVINE: Yes.

BENUN: Ceremonies. Weddings. They used to go like from the groom's house to the bride, the groom in the streets with music.

LEVINE: Really?

BENUN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Yeah.

BENUN: The music very nice and no invitations. They had—they had it in the paper. Everybody's invited, that's right. The wedding, there's a wedding, no invitations. In the paper. Everybody's invited.

LEVINE: Did anyone in your family get married while you were still living there in Jerusalem?

BENUN: You mean in Jerusalem? No.

LEVINE: No.

BENUN: Nobody was—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: Because we were all—my sister Rose in Cuba and my brother and my sister Fortune, but then my mother wanted to come here, just for a visit. We were me, Alice and my brother Isaac. That's all, and—and we stayed here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, you mentioned your mother wanted to come back to this country.

BENUN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And—and so when you left, do you remember getting ready to leave? Getting ready to come to America?

BENUN: Getting ready, it wasn't really—you know, because when she went to get to—she wanted to come alone to see the family over here. Her brother and they told her, "Why don't you take [unclear] with her?" You know, and my sister, "What about them? Can I take them with me?" She said, "Of course, you're American." On the spot, here's the paper and that's all. And my father remained over there because we only came for a visit and we're still going back. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Okay, and so you came, and when—do you remember actually getting on the boat that you took? The ship?

EI-825/BENUN

BENUN: Yes.

LEVINE: To come here.

BENUN: Sure.

LEVINE: And you say it was Byron Line.

BENUN: Byron Line, yes.

LEVINE: Byron Line, and what do you remember about that ship in particular, anything? About the ship, the voyage, anything?

BENUN: No. You know, everything was just nice. My mother cooked. You know, she was religious.

LEVINE: You mean, she cooked in—

BENUN: They would let her go—they let her go to the kitchen and cook.

LEVINE: On the ship?

BENUN: On the ship. It was very nice.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and what were your accommodations on the ship?

BENUN: Like for instance what?

LEVINE: Were you—were you in a cabin? Were you—

BENUN: We had a room, that's right. Yeah. Double deck, you know.

LEVINE: Bunk beds like.

BENUN: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

BENUN: Everything was just perfect.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you have a good experience of the voyage.

BENUN: Yeah. I mean we were excited. We were going to the States, and just for a visit.

LEVINE: Just for a visit.

BENUN: One visit.

LEVINE: Do you—do you remember coming into the New York Harbor?

BENUN: When we arrived?

LEVINE: Yes.

BENUN: That's how we came to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember—

BENUN: It was holiday, Rosh Hashanah and we couldn't go, you know, to wherever we were supposed to go and they let us stay three days in Rosh—I mean in Ellis Island.

LEVINE: I see.

BENUN: And we enjoyed it. We loved it.

LEVINE: So in other words, you came to Ellis Island because it was Rosh Hashanah?

BENUN: Yeah. Yeah, because we didn't have to come here because on account of my mother, she was American. I mean lot of people had to come here, but we came because we had to stay for the holiday over here. That's how we came to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Hmm. And tell me your impressions and describe what happened to you here at Ellis Island.

BENUN: That's—that's it. It was just a holiday and we liked it. At first we didn't want to stay, but then they were so nice. You know, they treated us so beautifully, you know, and we loved it. We really loved it. That's right.

LEVINE: Was it crowded? Were there lots of people here then?

BENUN: No, it wasn't crowded. No. No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: It was just very nice.

LEVINE: I see.

BENUN: Not—I mean we weren't disappointed.

LEVINE: Okay, and how about the food? What kind of food did you get here?

BENUN: What food? I'm—all the food that we eat now. Delicious, everything. Meats and chickens and—and fish. Everything. They served us everything.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

BENUN: It was very—we weren't disappointed. We loved it.

LEVINE: [Laughs] So you had a good first experience in America.

BENUN: Yes. Yes, that's right.

LEVINE: And then where did you go when you left Ellis Island?

BENUN: We went to my sister's house.

LEVINE: Fortune.

BENUN: Yeah, and we only stayed there maybe couple of weeks and right away we went—my mother wanted an apartment for herself.

LEVINE: Was—was this in Brooklyn where you went first?

BENUN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: Always in Brooklyn. And we found an apartment and we had family over here. One brought us a bed and the other one brought us a table. [Laughs] A couch. That's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: No, it was nice. It was very nice.

LEVINE: Why—when and why was the decision made—

BENUN: To come?

LEVINE: To stay. Not to go back, make it more than just a visit.

BENUN: Oh, yes. That's right. Everybody started to tell us—and we said we're going back. We're going back. My mother wrote a letter, a big letter to my father, ten pages that we want to go back, he should send us money. But that letter never got there because she put it in the wrong post—you know.

LEVINE: Post box.

BENUN: That's right, and he never got that letter and that was it. And after a year, she sent for him and we still have that house there. We never sold that house.

LEVINE: In Jerusalem?

BENUN: In Jerusalem. That's right.

LEVINE: Well, what's become of it?

BENUN: They want to make—we told them that—they wanted to buy it. They wanted to—we had a customer, fifty thousand pounds, but then they gave us an idea it's better to make it a synagogue. There's a synagogue next there, next door, so we told them we want to make it a syna—you know, part of the synagogue. That's it.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENUN: Yeah.

LEVINE: What was it like seeing your father when he—when he did come here?

BENUN: Yeah, very happy. Very, very happy. That's right.

LEVINE: And how did he feel about coming to the—to America?

BENUN: He wanted to come very badly but because of, you know, he was Syrian they told my mother she has to come here to send for him, and she did.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. And did you go to school once you got here to America?

BENUN: No, I didn't go to school.

LEVINE: No.

BENUN: I didn't go to school. My sister Alice went to school, but no, and my brother went to school, too.

LEVINE: But you were of an age where you could or couldn't and—

BENUN: I had to—yeah.

LEVINE: And you—uh-huh.

BENUN: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And what are some of your first experiences in this country? What kinds of things did you see for the first time or—

BENUN: That—I'll tell you what. That the women go to work. [Laughs] What's this? The women go to work. In Israel nobody goes. If you're a woman, don't go. That was—I mean, we were like, "What is this?" Oh, that a woman's place is in the house. Children go to school and the mother go—you know, stays home and takes care of the family and that was it.

LEVINE: And what about you personally? You weren't going to school, so were you in the home?

BENUN: No.

LEVINE: Were you—

BENUN: No, no, no.

LEVINE: What were you doing?

BENUN: I went—I used to go to they had—I forgot where. They had the elevator and I saw it.

LEVINE: The elevated train?

BENUN: Yeah, the—yeah, they had the elevator. I went and I worked in a place lingerie, you know.

LEVINE: In a shop?

BENUN: In a—no, it was a factory.

LEVINE: A factory, uh-huh.

BENUN: Yeah, they pay you like eight dollars a day. Eight dollars a day. Then my sister belonged to the—to the synagogue and she told them to give me a job as a kindergarten teacher and I—and I was—and they paid me very little, but it was nice. And the rest of the day I went to the movies.

LEVINE: [Laughs] What—do you remember any of those early movies? Who you liked as an actor or actress or—

BENUN: Oh, all the old actresses, you know. Not today's actresses, the old ones. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah.

BENUN: And cheap, also. Sometimes I went twice to the movies. [unclear] We lived on 22nd and 18th Avenue the Walker. That was it. That was the—

LEVINE: Yeah.

BENUN: Thank God it was very—I mean comfortable. When we came here, we didn't suffer.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and did you like teaching the kindergarten children?

BENUN: Yeah, a few years younger than me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, a few years younger. And because that's what your mother had done.

BENUN: Yeah, that's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

BENUN: And we were I mean comfortable.

LEVINE: And how about your mother and father did they—did they have an idea to become Americanized? To become like Americans or did they want to hold onto their ways that they had—

BENUN: Oh, no.

LEVINE: From Jerusalem and before?

BENUN: You mean the habits [unclear].

LEVINE: Yeah, habits.

BENUN: Everything's the same.

LEVINE: The same.

BENUN: The same, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and did you have a circle of people that you knew—

BENUN: Around us, yes.

LEVINE: From before.

BENUN: Sure. Families. All families. They all lived in Israel. Cousins and uncles and families and yeah—and we lived with each other very nicely, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENUN: That's it.

LEVINE: Can you remember the kind of family life, the extended family life that you had in Brooklyn? You know, after you became settled here, what kinds of things would you do as a family, let's say?

BENUN: For instance? Do?

LEVINE: Yeah, I mean would you have meals together? Would you—

BENUN: Yeah, that. Yes. Go to each other. Sure. Saturdays, you know, we used to go one week here, one week there, you know. But we lived very nicely with all the neighbors.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and you belonged to the same synagogue as—as a lot of people you were friendly with?

BENUN: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, the same synagogue and even today we go to the same synagogue. Of course, the old one we live far from them, but all the new synagogues we go together.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. By the way, I should have asked you before, what's the name of the synagogue that you gave your house to in—in—in Jerusalem? What's the name of that synagogue?

BENUN: Oh, I—I can't tell you.

LEVINE: That's okay.

BENUN: It's a Yeshiva.

LEVINE: Oh, a Yeshiva.

BENUN: Yeshiva, that's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: Now recently we gave it to them.

LEVINE: And how did you meet your husband?

BENUN: He lived I Tel Aviv. We lived in Jerusalem. Vacation from school I used to go to them and when he took vacation, he came to our house. And that's it. Yeah, we were related.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: Yeah, his mother with my father.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was it you liked about him?

BENUN: Was modern, very nice, handsome, tall. [Laughs] Yeah, it was very nice [unclear].

LEVINE: [Laughs] And—and did you—how many children did you have?

BENUN: Three boys and a girl.

LEVINE: And their names?

BENUN: Jack, Joey, Ronnie. Ronnie is Ramon—Raymond. Emily.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: That's right.

LEVINE: And what do you consider some of the high points of your life? What are the things that when you think back on them make you feel really good about?

BENUN: That thing—everything—I always lived very nicely and family life in the house and—and—and the children, they copied everything from us, and they have nice families and they live very nicely and this is it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.

BENUN: They always come to us on Saturday. Holidays together. Weddings we are together. We make parties. My granddaughter just got engaged. We had big party at my house. Everything at my house.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BENUN: Yeah. That's right.

LEVINE: Right, right.

BENUN: We follow. They follow and, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: I mean, I can't say it's old-fashioned because when you're with the family all the time, you stick together. You don't call that old-fashioned. That's unity, right?

LEVINE: Yeah. And now you've seen so many generations.

BENUN: Yeah. That is the same they follow. That's right.

LEVINE: They follow.

BENUN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: They're all here.

LEVINE: Yes, it's—

BENUN: You see them?

LEVINE: I—

BENUN: They're all here.

LEVINE: I've rarely seen such a large family gathering here. [Laughs]

BENUN: All here. "Grandma, grandma, grandma." I'm grandma to everybody.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

BENUN: Thank God.

LEVINE: Well, is there anything else you can think of--

BENUN: About?

LEVINE: About coming to this country as a fifteen year old girl and—and not planning to stay, but then spending the rest of your life here.

BENUN: Yeah, we loved—told you the beginning, maybe because we didn't get used to it over here, but then we loved it. We liked it and it was nice.

LEVINE: Do you know what it was that changed? That made the family change and say, "We really like it here and we want to stay?"

BENUN: We like it here. Yeah, my mother's family.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENUN: That's it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENUN: My mother's family and my mother loved it, you know, and that—and she—she used to live in the Bronx. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Did you go visit then your mother's family when you came here?

BENUN: They—they always came to us, yes, and her brother, my Uncle Abe. That's right, always came and mother always went there. Really, she had a family over here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENUN: That's right, and she had a very well-off family. They lived in Eastern Parkway. Morris, by the name Morris, and they always came, "Lily, Lily, Lily," you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENUN: And everything was just perfect. Thank God.

LEVINE: Wonderful. Well, is there anything else you would like to say? Now, your story's going to be here at Ellis Island.

EI-825/BENUN

BENUN: Oy, oy, oy.

LEVINE: And everyone can come and hear it. Is there anything you'd like to say before we close?

BENUN: Yeah. Yes, I love today being here, meeting nice people, nice people like you and having conversations with everybody. What more can you ask? Huh? Right.

LEVINE: It's a perfect place to close.

BENUN: Exactly.

LEVINE: I want to thank you so much.

BENUN: You're quite welcome. It was really special.

LEVINE: It's lovely to speak with you.

BENUN: A pleasure to talk to you. Very nice. Your smile is enough.

LEVINE: Thank you.

BENUN: That's enough.

LEVINE: Okay, I've been speaking with Sara Sutton Benun who came in 1927 at the age of 15 from Palestine. Today she is eighty-four and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I say thank you.

BENUN: You're quite welcome. It's a pleasure.

LEVINE: And I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]