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NATHAN GITTELMAN

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LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm here in Florida with Nathan Gittelman. It's August 29th, 1991 and Mr. Gittelman came from Poland in 1920 at the age of ten years. It's very nice to be here with you...

GITTELMAN: Thank you.

LEVINE: And let me begin by asking you your birth date.

GITTELMAN: I was born on December the 22nd, 1910.

LEVINE: And where were you born?

GITTELMAN: Born in Poland.

LEVINE: And the town?

GITTELMAN: In the small town of Blodawa.

LEVINE: B-L-O-D...

GITTELMAN: O-D-A-W-A.

LEVINE: A-W-A, okay. And could you describe the town?

GITTELMAN: Well, the town was like in the suburbs in a real country part with only about twenty-five families li-- living there. One of these huts with the straw roofs. And we lived there a family of about seven. And we made a living through more or less, we had a cow, we had a horse, and whatever you grew you saved in -- in the summer, you put away for the winter. And my sister and my oldest brother went out of town,

like different parts of the country to see what they could do to make some money so we had money to eat.

LEVINE: You mean they would buy things and then sell them? Is that what they would do when they went out of town?

GITTELMAN: No, they were working, like pickin' up jobs. My brother, my oldest brother was a, was supposed to be like a furrier, so he would make the pelts for the Polish people. And my sister was a cook for one of them wealthy families, so whatever edible she was able to bring and with the money so we got along. And then I was te-- this lasted for ten years, and then...

LEVINE: Well wait, before we leave that part, describe the hut. Was it one room? Was it...?

GITTELMAN: One room, one big room with a garage like. We had a horse and a cow, one horse and one cow. So the cow, we had milk and my mother used to make cheese and butter and all that stuff. And the horse used to do the plowing and whatever else. And we had trees...

LEVINE: And you had land to grow...

GITTELMAN: Yeah, we had land. We had, I would say, maybe an acre. And then we lived mainly, like I would sleep with my two brothers, like no beds, homemade beds like, you would - straw -- whatever -- with a - a sheet on top. And in the winter, we'd l --stay, we had like a big oven, like they had the old-fashioned ovens here that the bakeries have. And the oven went all winter long. We had, being we were - we were in a forest and we had plenty of lumber. And we kept ourselves warm that way.

LEVINE: Was it cold where you were?

GITTELMAN: Oh sure, it was freezing at all times. There it didn't mean a thing to be below zero.

LEVINE: And what about clothes, like shoes or boots...

GITTELMAN: Well, most of the time you went with, you had -- you picked up a pair of shoes here and there (or somebody send you from America) you had a shoe. But most of the time you walked around bare footed or, in the winter, you wrapped rags around. And being my brother was like making the pelts, so he used to bring home remnants and we'd make our own shoes from the from the pel-- you know, from the - the pelt, the leather, with the fur on it yet, with the skin on it, yeah, like a fur coat - the shoes.

LEVINE: Wow. What else can you think of that had to do with life in that little town?

GITTELMAN: Well, there wasn't much life there because in order to go to another part of the town it was twenty miles away, which was Russia. But maybe once in - in six, seven months or a year you would go by horse and wagon if somebody would take you. So that was the big town. But all the

rest, you would go to synagogue and children would play, you know, like neighbors, became like one big family. Until, once in awhile, the - the Pol-- the Polacks would get out of hand and they would get drunk and they'd put a match to the roof, and there went your whole house, because it all depended on the roof, the straw roofs.

LEVINE: So, in other words, was that like anti-Semitic. They would burn the roofs of the...

GITTELMAN: Yeah, anti-Se-- that's right. Only when they got out of hand, not all the time, and then we would have to fix it up and that's it.

LEVINE: Was there any medical care or anything...

GITTELMAN: Well, very little medical care because we were all pretty well, you know, preserved, you know, we ate plain food and, for the ten years that I lived there, I never remember seeing a doctor or anybody else seeing a doctor. And all the children before me, I was the youngest, so children before me were all born in the house, like a neighbor would help the woman out or somebody but as far as a doctor, I never seen a doctor until I came to America. I didn't even know what a doctor was. Yeah.

LEVINE: So did you go to school? Did your brothers and sisters go to school there?

GITTELMAN: No, I didn't go to school there. My brother went to, you wouldn't call it a Hebrew school, one of the Jewish guys, who lived there, he was teaching children for next to nothing 'cause he was working and making a poor living like everybody else, so Friday and Saturday was a big deal. And, you know, that's how some of them learned, but I didn't go to school because (pause) I didn't feel like going (he chuckles) or something.

LEVINE: You didn't have to go anyway.

GITTELMAN: No, there was no law that you had to go. No, no, no such thing.

LEVINE: Now was your family religious? Did you observe ,

GITTELMAN: No, no, my father, well, my father wasn't, as far as I know, my father left when my mother was pregnant with me. She was pregnant with me for six months, and he left for America because he wanted to get a, he ran away from the army.

LEVINE: Now tell me about that.

GITTELMAN: Well, when you joined the - the Polish Army, and they told him after four years, you can, you were finished. After four years they wanted him to join another four years, and he hated the army so what they did is, they gave him like a thirty day leave. During the thirty days he beat it and he went to France, because I had an uncle there. And little

by little he worked his way into America. And then when, the reason we came here is because life was so bad for them. I didn't know the difference because I was so young, but I understand as far as I knew them -- the Polacks, the Polish people were giving the Jews a hard time. Then was the -- the czar started the pogrom, and you had to run away sooner or later. So my father had a few dollars and he sent it to my sisters , I have a - I had an older sister, she was only sixteen years older than my mother. So she like took over --

LEVINE: Wait a minute, you...

GITTELMAN: My mother got married at fifteen and my sister was born a year later. So when I became, when I was ten years old, when I was born already she was a big girl, in the Twenties, you know what I mean? (telephone rings) So she became, my two sisters became like the mother, the father and everything else in the family. And little by little he sent us a few bucks and we left this town, went to another town, and everything took, took us two years to get here.

LEVINE: Well, tell me first, how long after your father left, did he send for you or did you...

GITTELMAN: Ten years later.

LEVINE: Ten years. So during those ten years your mother had to try to make enough to...

GITTELMAN: Well, I'm telling you, we had that little farm, between my sisters and my older brothers, you survived. You know it doesn't take much to survive.

LEVINE: Right. Now tell me your father's name and your mother's name and maiden name.

GITTELMAN: My mother's, my father's name was Yosef, Joseph in American, and my mother's name was Brayner [ph] in Jewish, when she came here they made it like Rebecca.

LEVINE: And what was her maiden name, do you remember?

GITTELMAN: Her maiden name was Gludenstein.

LEVINE: G-L-U-D

GITTELMAN: D-E-N-S, but I never bothered much with that name because we took my father's name.

LEVINE: Yeah, sure, yeah, and then how about your brothers and sisters, from the oldest down, their names.

GITTELMAN: Well, I got, my oldest sister was Leah, Pesche, Beryl, Annie, Alex, and there was two in between that died that I don't know about, and then I came along. And my brother is, my brother Alex is from a twin. At the age of three, the twin was a girl, she died from a sickness or

something. Probably if she was in America she'd survive. And that's all I can respond with that is.

LEVINE: So then did your father send you money enough to get here?

GITTELMAN: He sent us enough money the beginning to get out of Poland, that we couldn't, in order to get to America you had to go to Antwerp, Belgium, but in between we ran out of money for food and everything else, and everywhere you went over there, in order to get anywhere, on the boat or on the ship, if you didn't bribe whoever was in charge, you never got on it. I remember one incident where I was about seven years old and the trains were getting full so when we got on the train, so my sister gave them a few dollars, so he thought it was only a few people; well, when he saw seven people he says, " Well, the train is loaded," we can't put me on, 'cause I was, you know, a young kid. So she give him the last two rubles she had and he pushed me in through a window. And nobody, everybody stood for hours while the train was moving. Nobody sat. There was, the train didn't have no seats.

LEVINE: They were like cars, boxcars.

GITTELMAN: Like animals, like boxcars, that's exactly what they were, boxcars.

LEVINE: So now if you could break down the trip from your little village 'til you got on the ship that came to America ,

GITTELMAN: Well when we left that town, we went to neighboring towns for awhile, and then we took trains, leading us to different ways until we got to Belgium , Antwerp, Belgium. But that took, but then before that we went to , we had cousins in Germany, so we went there for a couple months to survive, and my sisters were working there. And after about seven -- six, seven months in Germany we left for France. We had an uncle there.

LEVINE: So you kept going to family members...

GITTELMAN: Family members to family members, different places, and finally from Paris, France, we had a little money, my sisters worked, and we were able to go to Belgium. And in Belgium, after a week, to get on the boat and we stood in this place, that place, you know, cheap hotels and whatever it took.

LEVINE: So your sisters earned enough money in each place to get you to the next.

GITTELMAN: Yeah, to keep going further, and in between my father would send a few dollars, and he would send it like we were able to pick it up. Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. And how do you remember that period of two years?

GITTELMAN: Well I was ten years old already, I was eight years old --

LEVINE: When you started.

GITTELMAN: --when I started, and I was, you know, I was pretty good at remembering things, and as you keep talking about these things it brings back more and more that revives you. You can't remember what you had last night's dinner, but you can remember what happened seventy years ago. You know that I see people that I haven't seen for sixty years, I know them by their voice. I can remember that. But if I saw somebody in the restaurant three days ago, I see them again, because you're old already. Yeah.

LEVINE: Now do you remember any other incidents that happened during those two years when you were going to different countries and different family members?

GITTELMAN: Well, it wasn't easy because when they - they knew you were poor, you know the old story, nobody likes a poor relative, especially if there was six of them -- seven at a clip. So they were glad, then they wouldn't have too much themselves. But when you're that age, there's no such thing as bad times. They gave you a piece of bread, it was a meal. And whatever else you were able to grab. As long as there was -- there's one thing that you survived on was -- as long as you had potatoes, you were able to survive. Because potatoes you can make twenty different kinds of meals if you know what you're doing, and necessity will make you do it. Yeah.

LEVINE: So, let's see, when you finally got to Antwerp, is that where you left from?

GITTELMAN: Yeah, Antwerp, yeah, we got on the train.

LEVINE: And then the ship...

GITTELMAN: The ship left from Antwerp right to America, to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: And it was called "the Finland"?

GITTELMAN: "The Finland," yeah.

LEVINE: Okay, what was that like, the ship?

GITTELMAN: The ship was -- the cattle and the horse farms that they ship today live better than the people on that ship. There was no such thing as rooms. There's no such thing as benches. It's either you stood or you layed down in a corner. Everybody was standing and talking but everything, you slept on whatever little baggage you came with. The only thing you had to watch out is for your bedding.

LEVINE: Is that what you mostly had, bedding?

GITTELMAN: Only bedding, only bedding and maybe a changeover, maybe one changeover, then you'd wash it at night or something or you'd wear it a whole week, it didn't mean a thing to wear underwear a whole week. And to keep yourself clean you took a pail of water or something, whatever

you were able to do for yourself. And it was -- there was no such thing as served meal on the boat. They gave you, like you hear the prisoners of war that -- that's complaining (he laughs) like they complain now. That was a heaven if we got half the meals that they got, and we paid for that boat. And this went on for thirty days. Finally we saw Ellis Island, the Land of the Free. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Remember your impression when you first saw it?

GITTELMAN: Well, you know, you're excited, you're young, and then, especially when you see a man that -- that's your father. You have never seen him before. And then you saw relatives that came before you, two years before that, that came to visit you...

LEVINE: Did your father meet you at Ellis Island?

GITTELMAN: Yeah, yeah, my father was there.

LEVINE: What was it like when you saw him for the first time?

GITTELMAN: Well, it was nice. He was a nice looking man, nice well kept, clean man and he took us -- I don't really remember exactly, but from Ellis Island, we lived on the lower East Side, which wasn't so far away where we lived. So we all go into some kind of a truck that somebody had or something and he took us to this gorgeous apartment that the bedrooms were six by six, no windows, railroad flat, kitchen no window, the only window you had is in the door. Had no toilets. Toilets, some of them that they - they improved, they had it in the hall.

But there was four families on a floor, so the two families in the front shared one toilet and the families in the back shared the other toilet. And toilet paper was the good old telephone book or pear, the pear papers, they used to wrap the pears around in those days; so that was toilet paper. And then we moved into a place, a bigger place, and if you had to go in the bathroom and if somebody was in there, you had to go in the yard. You had to run down two, three flights, and in the winter time in New York is cold, it's not like today's, the weather's changing in the last fifty years. You had to go in the snow, without shoes, without anything to go into the bathroom, in that wooden toilet. Today (he laughs) the city would con-- they would condemn because the water don't come down fast enough. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Well, wait. Let me just ask you, what happened, what did people do when you saw the Statue of Liberty when you were coming into the harbor?

GITTELMAN: Well, when you first come in from Europe, the Statue of Liberty, it means something but you know, when you see the Statue of Liberty, you're in America, you know what I mean. But as a symbol, it meant nothing to a ten year old. All I was interested is to see, to get out, you were so glad you got off the boat. But then there's the little, after you got off the boat, you didn't, they didn't let you off right away because in the processing. If your name, they ask you on the processing, they asked you what your name is, half of them didn't

understand English, ninety-nine out of a hundred didn't understand English. If you said your Jewish name was Yonah, your name was John, Jimmy. If your name was, uh, they - they switched it around like crazy to get rid of you. And then there was so much lice on the boat that the people, the women and the kids that they made you take a, they put you into a steam room that had maybe fifty...

LEVINE: On Ellis Island?

GITTELMAN: On Ellis Island, a room maybe with a hundred people. And then, they -- woman were on one side and men on the other side, and a child under twelve had to go with the mother. And that took time because they had so many of them. They had a coup-- they had maybe two thousand on the boat and here you were only able to go in fifty at a time. And then after that, they had to give you a haircut because no matter how much they -- the pressure, lice gets into your head and nothing in the world will get it out, once it's in there. You think you kill it but you didn't, so what they do, a man and a boy they shave completely, a bald head. And the woman they shaved, with about a, they left about an inch or so hair on her head so when she gets home, and a lot of women were held over, they wouldn't let them out at all because they had bad heads, infested, and if the doctor said you can't get off, you can't get off.

LEVINE: So, in other words, everybody who came in on your ship, everybody had their head shaved?

GITTELMAN: Everybody, yeah, everybody.

LEVINE: And did you stay overnight there?

GITTELMAN: Yeah, we had to stay overnight because it took so long to process, so until it got to you or some way or other, so you had to stay overnight. But the first thing in the morning, especially if you had somebody picking you up, you were given preference. You know what I mean, because you knew you - you had a destination, because a lot of people just came without any destination.

LEVINE: Did you, what do you remember about sleeping? What kind of accommodations did they have for you?

GITTELMAN: On the boat?

LEVINE: No, on the Ellis Island.

GITTELMAN: Ellis Island, just on the boat. They kept you on the boat.

LEVINE: Oh, you slept on the boat?

GITTELMAN: On the boat, they don't let you out.

LEVINE: Oh, so you had to go back into steerage, into the hold?

GITTELMAN: Back into the, back on to the same boat because the boat was only right outside Ellis Island, on the ocean. Because Ellis Island had

no facilities. They may have a room or something for detainees but they don't have for so many people with baggage and all. Not that we had a lot of baggage, you know, everybody's poor. If they had baggage at all some of them they, what they called baggage amounted to nothing when they came here.

LEVINE: So, in other words, you didn't really spend much time in the Great Hall on Ellis Island, the big hall...

GITTELMAN: No, no, you just looked around, first of all, there was nothing with nothing there to begin with (pause) those days. You know I'm going back seventy years, more, and everybody, especially at my age, you were so glad to get out of here because you were like a dog in a kennel. You want -- everybody, even a dog, don't like to be, even if you gave him a million dollar kennel, he wants to get out in the street. And we were anxious to see America with the fine apartment. Today that building would be condemned a hundred times, but it was livable, even though, it was nice because we - if you come from bad to worse, but we came from worse to better, so it's an improvement.

LEVINE: Yeah. So your father had already taken, he was already living in that apartment when you came.

GITTELMAN: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And then what? How did you get adjusted to this country?

GITTELMAN: Well, as far as I was concerned it was nice here; you walked out, you made friends because I came at a time where school was just opening for the new semester. So, at that time, no matter what -- how old you were, you went to 1-A. They put my -- I was ten, my brother was fourteen and my sister was seventeen; we all got into 1-A. But then after a while, things improved so they went according to age, so they -- they -- they stopped school and they put them in night school. But I only went to school to the sixth grade.

LEVINE: Did you learn English by then?

GITTELMAN: Oh, sure, I learned English because I was only ten years old so I didn't hang around with no foreign children. But the older people, the reason they didn't learn, because they became friends with the people that they knew in Poland. Everybody got off at the same town. So my -- brother spoke good English but he still had the accent - the accent. My sisters, they talked but they still have accents because they hung around with all their friends that came from the other side too. I never bothered with them, with the old - with the young kids, because there wasn't any, as far as I knew.

LEVINE: There weren't any kids your age that were coming from Poland?

GITTELMAN: Not that I knew of. But we -- I got friends with the kids in the building, that lived in same building on the same street and school and everything else.

LEVINE: So you spoke English with them because you wouldn't have understood what they spoke otherwise.

GITTELMAN: That's right, I had to speak, you know, as bad as it was, but you learn fast. You know when you're young, you learn fast. You know, see I write pretty good.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GITTELMAN: In fact - in fact, my daughter's a high school teacher; she teaches in college twice a week in Brooklyn College. She spells worse than I do. She's got to ask me a lot of times, "How do you spell this, Dad?" And she's a college professor like. But I picked up, mainly fast.

LEVINE: So you stayed in school until sixth...

GITTELMAN: Until I was - I was - the reason I stood in school until I was sixteen. But the kids -- at sixteen, I was only in the fifth grade, at the age of fifteen I was in the fifth grade and I was fifteen and a half years old, so I wasn't going to be a professor or a school teacher, so I figured that the family needed help so I went to work here and there for them -- made a buck here, a buck there, and...

LEVINE: Did your family stay together? They were all...?

GITTELMAN: Yeah, yeah. They -- no, then my sis-- after a year or two, my two sisters got married here, so they went away and my brother got a job, and another brother got a job. And I was still going to school, but I was sixteen so I went to work. I learned a trade.

LEVINE: What was your first job?

GITTELMAN: The first job, I worked for one of those places where they make shoes. So, I didn't like the job 'cause too hot there. They had a steam room. My job was to take the shoes in the steam room to dry the glue. So I didn't work there long. Then somebody got me a job in Browning King on 32nd Street and Broadway, a fancy haberdashery store, to -- like a stock boy. So, one day I'm talking to the manager and he said to me, "You know, I'm working' here over twenty years and I'm still the manager here, but no money. You can die here. You'll never make what you call a decent living."

So, I don't know, something, they told me what to do and I didn't like what these guys were telling me what to do so I quit the job, and my father had a friend of his, a house painter, so he took me in in his place. I was working for two dollars a day I got. It was hard work but I liked it because no bosses over your head, no nothing. And I remained for sixty years. Then I went in business for myself, made good money and then I was able to retire on the painting business. I was good at my trade anyway.

LEVINE: Okay, now, what about your mother and father, did they learn English?

GITTELMAN: They, very little, because my mother was a sick woman when she got here and she never left the house unless my sister or somebody would take her. So where did she go? She went from one sister, from one daughter to another. Friday to this daughter, Saturday to this, then they had like a society. They would meet every Saturday night, but the society that they had here was the same thing as like that they were in Poland! You know what I mean?

LEVINE: All the same people?

GITTELMAN: If I come to your house and you come to my house, then we never learn anything.

LEVINE: So was your mother sickly in Poland, too?

GITTELMAN: No, she wasn't sickly. See I don't, what you call sickly but she like, she wasn't sick but she would like -- couldn't walk, you know, sleep a lot, then, and she liked to listen to the radio and read. She was educated in Hebrew so she read, she used to tell you stories that'd she'd pick up years ago on the radio like anybody. And my father, he never made what you call a, he was never what you called a provider, a good provider. [not understood] But as far as I can remember my father, if he made thirty-five dollars a week, it was a good week. Then later on...

LEVINE: And what was he doing for work?

GITTELMAN: He was like a, a nailer. After stretching the furs in a place right up to your knees in dye. Dyer, dying animal skins. And he retired, it must have been sixty years old he retired. And then for awhile, they got like, it wasn't really relief but it was like they would give you a certain amount of money, aid. They didn't give you relief or money so they got into a project.

LEVINE: In Manhattan?

GITTELMAN: In Manhattan. The Vladick Housing on Madison Street in New York. And I - then I was already working making nice money, my brother was making nice money, my sisters married not too bad. So they paid the rent, this one gave this and then they had an over abundance of money already. So they, what they were doing, I had a brother in Poland yet that was left over because he was married. Then he went to Israel. My sister in Israel took him over. So we sent him money to buy a little house, this and that.

LEVINE: Now, you had a sister who came to the United States and then went to Israel or she went right to Israel?

GITTELMAN: Yeah. No, she went -- she came here and she got married. She was single when she came here but she married a guy that was in America for a long time. His father and mother owned land in Israel for eighty years ago, ninety years ago. His father came with Ben Gurion. His father was one of these rag peddlers that went in the street hollering "Rags!" but he was a great believer in Israel. So he bought land years and years ago in Israel. They didn't know how to measure.

They didn't have such things as an acre. They didn't know what an acre was. So in order to buy land, if you got a young Arab, so you threw -- he threw a stone. If he was young and he wanted to show off, so he gave you a good deal. So he wound up, like with him and Ben Gurion, they wind up practically a whole town.

But what happened, this went on for years, and my brother-in-law always liked to travel. He didn't get -- if he would work, save up enough money, he'd go all over the world: Poland, Russia, Egypt, Jap--, anywheres. Then his father died and he had all this property where they are today, and his mother said to him, " Listen, if you don't come the Arabs are going to wind up taking it away from me." So he had a brother that wasn't so healthy and my brother-in-law wasn't the healthiest guy in the world but he had a nice business. So he sold out and they went to Israel to take o-- .(ends abruptly)

END OF SIDE A

BEGINNING OF

SIDE B

LEVINE: Are there any attitudes that your mother and father had or that you had from the time you were a little boy that you carried with you throughout your life?

GITTELMAN: All good, all good attitudes. My parents were glad they were away from, because my mother, they worked hard all those years in Europe, accomplished nothing. Here they had it easy. They lived in a steam heated apartment in a development, in like a project. The rent was good. If you didn't have the rent, the city took care of it for you. She had children helping her out. My sisters lived in the neighborhood. Didn't have to cook or anything like that there and then my father went, in the summer he stood with me in the country and, that I had built, and then after my mother died. And then in the winter he would stay with my oldest sister in New York and then he went to the hospital and he died.

LEVINE: And is there anything that you think you learned in the course of your life, that is something you...

GITTELMAN: Well, (he laughs) I learned, there's very little that you can learn - if you had, the only reason I think I'm around all this time is because I really didn't have a boss for the last sixty year. So no matter how much money you make -- you can make a million, I can make a thousand, but sometimes my -- your million is hard to make but my thousand is easy to make and I'm satisfied, you know what I mean. The average guy figures, listen I see people that got nothing and I came here, I got a beautiful home, and especially in Florida, a condo, I had a beautiful home and nice car every two years, go where you want, went to Israel any time I wanted. I went with them twice [referring to people in other room], took my wife every three years, I remarried and I took her twice in three years. Maybe next year I go back again.

LEVINE: So tell me who you married. Your first wife.

GITTELMAN: My first wife I married was Nancy Zito. She was Italian. You know, those years, sixty years ago there wasn't many Jewish boys that married Italian girls.

LEVINE: And so, how did your family react?

GITTELMAN: So, the beginning they resented it. So, my father more or less resented it, and he was more or less ashamed, you know for the neighbors that your s-- everybody would give him a dig in schul and all that, " Your son married an Italian!?" And I didn't bother too much with him, but I used to sneak up Fridays to see my mother, but he would, my mother would, I would give her money and she would send to Israel to my brother. One day he said to her, " Where you getting all this money to send Beryl?" So she finally says to him, " You know, ", my Jewish name is Nachman , she told him one day, she said " If it wasn't for Nachman your son Beryl in Israel wouldn't have a house, wouldn't have anything." Because, you know, I was able to, like, I would go, then my brother used to drop off some money. One day , my mother still had the old habit, when I was a child she'd say " Here's a quarter", I would give her a hundred dollars, she would say " Here's a quarter." (he laughs) I says " Mom, what do I need your quarter? I just gave you a hundred dollars! "(they laugh) She says, " Hold the quarter." (he repeats " Hold the quarter! " [with an exaggerated Jewish accent], they laugh)

LEVINE: What about about your wife Nancy's family, the Italian family? How did they feel...

GITTELMAN: Oh, no, they liked me right away because they knew if she's marrying a Jewish guy she'll have what to eat and he won't hit her. (they laugh) And I got along. Her mother and father lived with me for thirty years.

LEVINE: Oh.

GITTELMAN: 'Til they died. I bought them a house. You know, those days, cheap house, but I renovated it for them, and they lived there 'til the two of them died. And even before that I had rented a big house and they lived with me. And I got along very good with the sisters and the brothers and everybody.

LEVINE: And then finally did your father...?

GITTELMAN: Finally, finally, after years and years, my wife became the best daughter-in-law and the best to my father because she came to the country, she - she respected his religion, she made him separate dishes , he made everything himself , she gave him paper plates, where he didn't have to worry about kosher and non-kosher. And my -- she would go up every week, talk to my mother, help her clean up the house, where my sisters wouldn't do it. They got like, you know, too wealthy for them. Yeah. And then she wound up the best daughter-in-law.

LEVINE: And then what are the names of the children that you had?

GITTELMAN: My son, the oldest one, he's fifty-seven, his name is Ronald; and my daughter, Dorothy, is fifty-two years old, well-off, married, well, good, kids are college graduates. And my son is doing pretty good. He's an agent for these concerts, rock and roll and whatever else he comes in contact. He lives nice, lives in New York, fifteen hundred dollars a month rent, rides around in a beautiful car and whatever. He don't bother me, I don't bother him. (both laugh) I don't ask him how he's doing, he pays his rent, that's all I'm interested.

And I see him all summer long. I go up to the country I see them. I stay with my daughter now. Yeah. I had built a three family house, so I built myself an apartment there. So while I was living there, fine. When I re-married, she didn't like the country, because she come from the country, this one I'm married to her. She hates the country. So I gave up the apartment, so they, I let her keep it. They rent it for two thousand, twenty-five hundred. This year I went for three weeks, so they got me a bungalow across the street.

LEVINE: Okay, is there anything else you can think of about either your trip to this country or changes in you over the time you've been in this country, how you think about life from where you stand...?

GITTELMAN: Well, the only thing is where my time there was a lot of money to be made with no investment. And the business I was in and the company I worked for, for forty-two years, I had a chance to make a lot of money with no investment. But I was the type 'Let the other guy worry, let the other guy --' because the company I worked for they had about ten different bosses and the bigger they were, the less money they had in cash. And I didn't like to get up in the morning, so I just worked with two men and whatever I made I was satisfied, you know what I mean? I had a beautiful home in this development, paid cash for it, had a summer home, beautiful cars every year or what else do you need, go for trips, go to Europe. We went to -- I went -- in fact I went with Sam and Irene, we went to Alaska, we went to (pause) all over. For a -- one year we did nothing but travel. We bought those tickets, senior citizen, get up and go, went to Vegas, every -- every other week we went to Vegas.

LEVINE: So what, what do you think, I guess you were satisfied with...

GITTELMAN: As it turned out? Yeah, everything is -- I - I was well satisfied because I didn't have to work for anybody and that's what will keep a person living longer. When you get up in the morning, see when your working at a late age or even up until about fifty, if your working for somebody you're always in your mind that you don't know when your going to get laid off or when your going to say the wrong word to this boss of yours and he gets fed up looking at your face so many years, and you get laid off, and then you can't get a job anymore. So you're constantly worried. I have no money, here read in the papers today you'll see people forty-five, fifty, mortgages up to their ears, big rents, car payments.

But, I never got to work late, I used to get up nine, ten. You don't have to worry am I late? Did I do this, did I do this right? I

had a good income every week, didn't matter. And when that's not on your mind, when you go to sleep with a clear head, and you walk around all day long with a clear head, that is the main, that is what my theory is, I don't know about anybody else. But I've noticed that many people where I live , they're all seventy-eight, eighty, eighty-two , most of them had a small business. And I don't have to tell you today with the social security, today the average man sixty-five years old gets more sec-- social security than he can earn in his lifetime.

LEVINE: Okay, let me ask you this, is there anything, when you think back to your time in Poland or the two years you took getting here, are there any memories that, when you think of that time, that's what you think of?

GITTELMAN: Well, once in awhile -- I think I was sleeping with my brother in the bunk beds (we were about six years old, he was about seven and a half, eight, my older brother) and I had these German guys come in, and they were looking for women. And my sisters were hiding in the bushes outside with my mother and all.

LEVINE: This is in your little village.

GITTELMAN: In the village.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GITTELMAN: And...

LEVINE: Was this a common thing that the soldiers would come looking for...?

GITTELMAN: Yeah, yeah, common thing, they would switch. One year the Germans were good and then as good as they were one time that's how bad they became the next time, during the war. So one guy says, " In order," he says, "if we cut one of these kid's throat, the women will come running, 'cause he'll scream." So another guy said to them, " Ahh, they're two little boys, leave them alone," and they walked out.

LEVINE: Wow.

GITTELMAN: And that - that stands out in my mind, that we were saved by just because one guy said, " Leave them alone, they're not doing any harm." Yeah. And that's all they were actually looking for. They knew there was no money in that town so they were looking for young, you know, my sisters -- one sister was maybe twenty, the other one was eighteen, the other one was sixteen. So that's what they were looking for. And anything else that you had, like in silverware or gold or you found somewhere or glassware that you had or coins or something, but when they walked in that house they knew there was nothing. Then the Cossacks, the Russian Cossacks, you know with the big hats, they started to give you trouble.

LEVINE: What did they do?

GITTELMAN: They did, they slaughtered people like out of nowhere. Also looking for -- mainly for the woman, they were looking for woman and they would get in trouble and stealing anything you had in - in sight. Because in Poland, as poor as you was, you had a silver cup that the old man would make Peysakh [Passover] with or some kind of thing that was worth, for remembrance, probably it was worth nothing to them. I remember one day they - they robbed the church. Small church, they took every piece of thing out of it and then they put a match to it. And if they didn't like you they would throw a match on your roof and there was, you know, -- it was dry season, the whole house would go up. And then the whole town would come with pails, and then the roof got out so you just had to put up a new straw roof. There was nothing to rebuild.

LEVINE: So would you say you lived in fear most of the time?

GITTELMAN: In - in -- Europe you lived in fear all the time, all the time, if you were Jewish. Only if you were Jewish. I don't know about any other feelings. And the Po--the Polack didn't have it so good either. That's why they, a lot of them, wound up here, the Polish people.

LEVINE: Yeah, they had to worry about, I guess, the...

GITTELMAN: Well they were worried the -- see they were -- when they came here they had trouble, they were worried that the Jews were gonna kill them 'cause it's a free country. You're not gonna have it as good as you had it. Over there you were with the monopoly, here you're the minority. So they, but after awhile you forget about all those things and, you know, today in America we don't care what the hell you are Polish, German, Lithuanian. As far, if the guy's nice you bother with him. If he's not nice you avoid him. But in Europe you couldn't do that because they lived right next door to you.

Like, even when I lived here, I had an Italian guy, he was an American-Italian. He bought two houses and he had trouble with them, he bought them at the bad ti- he bought them at the right time but when he wanted to sell them, was bad. He turn around, he says to me, "The only one that should buy houses is you Jews." He was my next door neighbor. I says, " Because you know why, you're a stupid grease-ball." I says, " I told you to rent it 'til things get better." He sold the two houses for forty-five thousand dollars. A year later he -- they were getting sixty for one. So he only remembered, today I see him and I wouldn't spit at him. He's an old man, he's eighty-eight years old and he's a cripple in a wheelchair. So when I pass by sometimes I say -- I don't even want to repeat it, but I say to myself, if I'd have... (they laugh)

LEVINE: Okay, is there anything else you can think of that has to do with coming here?

GITTELMAN: Oh, coming.

LEVINE: Traditions, anything you've held on to from the old country.

GITTELMAN: We had nothing. (he laughs)

LEVINE: I mean ideas or ways of thinking about things.

GITTELMAN: Not when you're ten years old.

LEVINE: No.

GITTELMAN: Not when you're ten years old, all you had, when you came as a youngster, you met kids, they made fun out of you, they called you a grease-ball, you know, but they were more or less in the same boat as you. There was no such thing as your father's got a big Lincoln and you're riding around with a five year old junk box. He didn't have any. I didn't have any. But today there's no so much because I can buy a Lincoln that's two years old (he laughs), three years old, that beats him. I don't know if you remember, I had a Cadillac that was twenty-three thousand, two years later, I bought it for five. So I wound up with the big, big deal Cadillac, which, in different times, you could never accomplish it if you lived to be a million, you couldn't accomplish those things.

LEVINE: Have you accomplished what you wanted to, would you say?

GITTELMAN: More or less, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, it sounds it.

GITTELMAN: My age, what the hell, what could I accomplish? I'm alive. You go here, you go there, you can still take trips, go to Europe when I want to, go to Vegas, go to the Islands. But the ideas is, every month there's no money coming in. If you have a bad income, you got, you know what I mean, it's, it gets to you that you can't go into a decent restaurant. You go to the supermarket, you got to look at the label, how much is it? Could I get a bargain? I see, we go shopping every week, Thursday, she spends fifty, sixty dollars every week. And I never let her, I never bother with coupons, but I see people spend more time shopping with the coupon than they're buying. And there's really no bargain because you're buying top quality thing, that's more money than the other thing, so you're really not getting anything.

LEVINE: Okay, well thank you very much...

GITTELMAN: It's all right. It's been a pleasure.

LEVINE: It's been very nice talking with you.

GITTELMAN: Yeah, I talk a lot of it. Sometimes my granddaughter used to ask me a lot of these things; what was it like in Europe?

VOICE: Are you finished yet?

GITTELMAN: Yeah, finished.

VOICE: Good.

EI-83/GITTELMAN

