EI-837
LOUIS CHARLES SHERMAN
BIRTHDATE: SEPTEMBER 6, 1912
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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
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POLAND, 1917
AGE: 4

SHIP: THE NOORDAM
PORT:
RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Okay, today is December 28th, 1996. I'm here in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with Mrs. Louis Charles Sherman, who came to this country from Poland in 1917 when he was four years old. Mr. Sherman came on the Noordam, on the ship the Noordam and at the time of this interview is eighty-four years of age.

SHERMAN: That's correct.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I'm delighted to be here and I think you have more to say than you think you do. So let's just start at the beginning. If you'd give your birth date first.

SHERMAN: September 6th, 1912.

LEVINE: And you were born in Poland. Where in Poland were you born?

SHERMAN: In the city of Pabunitza.

LEVINE:: Pabunitza. Okay, and did you live in Pabunitza up until you left?

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: You were there for those four years.

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: Okay, do you—I know you were very young, but do you have any memories of Pabunitza?

SHERMAN: I'm not certain, but I—I have a feeling that I remember how to go to my grandmother's place.

LEVINE: How do you—what do you remember? Like when you think about that, what—what comes to your mind?

SHERMAN: It was to go to this corner and the corner street was—had a streetcar line. Turn to the right one block, cross the street and there was my grandmother's place.

LEVINE: [Laughs] And what did it look like, your grandmother's place?

SHERMAN: No memory.

LEVINE: Do you remember your grandmother?

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: Isn't that funny, you remember the directions. Wow. Now, how about your own house, anything that you recall?

SHERMAN: I seem to recall that it was one large room, divided by a curtain.

LEVINE: Did you have brothers and sisters?

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: Just—

SHERMAN: And on one side of the curtain was my father's workshop. He was a weaver on a hand loom.

LEVINE: Oh. Now, do you remember your—your father came to this country before you and your mother.

SHERMAN: 1913.

LEVINE: So—so you wouldn't really remember your father from Poland.

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: At all, but you remember his workshop?

SHERMAN: I remember that the one large room was divided in half by a curtain and the living quarters were on one side of the curtain and the workshop was on the other.

LEVINE: Hmm. Wow.

SHERMAN: Although he was already gone since 1913.

LEVINE: Was that workshop used at all, after he left, that you—

SHERMAN: I don't think so.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. So what did he make on the loom, do you know?

SHERMAN: Shawls.

LEVINE: Oh. Wow, and your mother, did she work at all?

SHERMAN: She had to work, after my father left. He claimed that he sent money, but we—she never got any. She had to go in the country and lug potatoes, hundred pound sacks on her back and sell it in the market in town.

LEVINE: Wow. Do you—

SHERMAN: That's how we lived on.

LEVINE: Wow, do you remember the market?

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: Did you ever go to the market or—huh. So did your mother ever tell you about what that life was like when you were so young in Poland?

SHERMAN: Well, she's the one who told me about it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SHERMAN: And on her expeditions she left me at home by myself.

LEVINE: And what was your mother's name?

SHERMAN: Sarah.

LEVINE: Sarah, and her maiden name?

SHERMAN: Jedwab. [PH]

LEVINE: Can you spell it?

SHERMAN: J-E-D-W-A-B. In Polish it means silk.

LEVINE: Huh? Did she have family around that you visited or—

SHERMAN: She had one sister in Poland who has since been killed by the Nazis and then she had siblings in the United States.

LEVINE: Oh, and your father's name?

SHERMAN: Kalman, K-A-L-M-A-N. Kalman.

LEVINE: And—and why was it that he came to the United States in 1913?

SHERMAN: To make a life in the United States.

LEVINE: Well—was—was there any particular pressure on him to leave?

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: No, uh-huh. So did he have family over here in the United States?

SHERMAN: No, my mother's brother was in Chicago. That's how he came to Chicago.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did he know him?

SHERMAN: Huh?

LEVINE: Did he know your mother's brother from Poland?

SHERMAN: I don't think so.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Well—

SHERMAN: And he also had some buddies from Pabunitza in Chicago.

LEVINE: Oh. That was a large Polish community, wasn't it, in Chicago?

SHERMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-hmm. So he's—he was a weaver in Poland.

SHERMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then when he came to Chicago, what did he do for work?

SHERMAN: He got a job with a Greek American Sponge Company.

LEVINE: Sponge?

SHERMAN: Sponge.

LEVINE: Oh.

SHERMAN: Just what he did, I really don't know.

LEVINE: Huh.

SHERMAN: But his salary was nine dollars a week.

LEVINE: And you're saying that he—he said he sent money, but you and your mother just never received it?

SHERMAN: No, he said he sent money and he sent steamship tickets. My mother never received it. Said he sent it through a man by the name of Schiff, S-C-H-I-F-F in Chicago, supposedly. He was swindled.

LEVINE: Hmm. Was that—do you have any sense of that? Was that common for someone to—I assume his English wasn't that good and he—and he turned over the money to this Mr. Schiff.

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: And that—that was the way people did it, to send money back to their families?

SHERMAN: That was Mr. Schiff's business.

LEVINE: Ah.

SHERMAN: Steamship tickets, travel. Money transfer.

LEVINE: Hmm. Wow. Okay, now, why was it that you and your mother left when you did in January of 1917?

SHERMAN: This was in the middle of World War I and the Germans had captured our city and there was a lull in the fighting and we had the opportunity to leave. The Germans gave us passports.

LEVINE: Oh. So was that the period—

SHERMAN: In German it's called a Rezishine. [PH]

LEVINE: The Germans were wanting you to leave, is that right?

SHERMAN: Not exactly.

LEVINE: No? But they gave you passports?

SHERMAN: That's right. They made arrangements for transport through Germany into Holland and we left on the Holland Dutch Steamship Line, the Noordam.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, do you—

SHERMAN: It's not the same Noordam as presently. There's a new version of the Noordam.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Do you know why the Germans were—the Germans were—did you personally—do you remember anything about World War I from the Germans that were in your town?

SHERMAN: No. No, I don't.

LEVINE: Okay. All right, so do you remember getting to the Noordam?

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: Okay. Do you remember the passage on the ship at all?

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: Okay, and the Statue of Liberty, you don't remember seeing that when you came into New York?

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: No. Okay, and then you—you went to Ellis Island?

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: And you have some vague memories of that. Why don't you talk about that?

SHERMAN: I'm not positive, but I think it's correct, I remember a steel stairway with steps but no risers and I was afraid to fall in the open section. So I think it's—this memory is correct because it frightened me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHERMAN: Then I seem to remember gray blankets. That is all. I don't remember leaving Ellis Island, coming to Chicago. I remember being in a flat in Chicago.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember seeing your father again?

SHERMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember like the reunion? What—what that was like?

SHERMAN: Not exactly the reunion, but I remember the flat we inhabited.

LEVINE: What can—what do you remember about that?

SHERMAN: It had no toilet. It was a community toilet on the floor for three or four apartments.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What was it like—

SHERMAN: And was just a commode.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What was the layout of the apartment like, do you remember that at all?

SHERMAN: No, I don't. I know for baths we used to go to my uncle's house.

LEVINE: Oh. Huh. Do you remember any of the neighbors in that flat were—in that building where the flat was?

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: Ah, did—did the family live in Chicago in a Polish enclave? Were there mostly all Poles?

SHERMAN: No, it was a Jewish neighborhood.

LEVINE: It was a Jewish neighborhood. Were the Jews mostly immigrants?

SHERMAN: I wouldn't know.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. So do you remember any first impressions of this country? Things that struck you as different?

SHERMAN: I marveled how my mother used to take me by streetcar to my uncle's place. I was always afraid of getting lost, but somehow without English she managed.

LEVINE: What was your mother like? How do you remember your mother, from the time you were a little boy?

SHERMAN: I don't know. I have a picture on the wall there.

LEVINE: Oh, good. Okay, I'd like to see that. We'll see it when we finish. Did she—was she happy to come to this country or how—what were—what were her feelings about it?

SHERMAN: Oh, sure. Sure, she left—she left Poland. She left the war. That section of Poland had been in possession of the Russians and the Germans defeated the Russians and our city was bombarded. But when we left in early 1917, the Germans were in command.

LEVINE: Do you remember starting school?

SHERMAN: Yes. We used to live across the street of the school and my mother would bring me milk and cookies at recess.

LEVINE: [Laughs] And how was it learning the language? What—what was that like for you?

SHERMAN: By entering school, I already was acquainted with English through contact with my cousins and playmates.

LEVINE: So you learned it easily? Relatively easily?

SHERMAN: I imagine so.

LEVINE: Well, you would just be starting school at the right age, anyway. Right, I mean as far—

SHERMAN: That's [unclear] six years.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

SHERMAN: I was very small and the principal didn't believe that I was six years old. My mother had to get three disinterested people to attest to the fact that I was six.

LEVINE: Did you have a birth certificate?

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So—

SHERMAN: Are your questions recorded?

LEVINE: Yeah.

SHERMAN: Oh.

LEVINE: Yeah. They should be. Okay, so let's see. So your father—did he continue to work for the Greek American Sponge Company?

SHERMAN: Later on he switched to lamp companies as a wood finisher and then the vogue was wooden lamps, and wooden lamps became passé and they switched to metal. After that he became a wirer on the metal lamps.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh, and how about your mother? Did she ever work?

SHERMAN: During World War II she worked in a cannery.

LEVINE: Oh. Well, let's go through—how long did you stay in school?

SHERMAN: Through college.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh, and what did you do? What was your line of work?

SHERMAN: I'm a registered pharmacist.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. So did you—do you know when you decided you were going to be a pharmacist and what it was that—that interested you or that helped you make that decision?

SHERMAN: Early on when I was about six or seven, I was fascinated by a neighborhood pharmacy. White tile floor and colored bottles in the window and a hospital smell in the pharmacy.

LEVINE: Oh, wow. Now, did you have brothers and sisters after in this country?

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: You're an only child?

SHERMAN: My mother had a daughter who died in infancy.

LEVINE: Huh. Did your mother and father hold onto—were they a religious—were they religious, your mother and father?

SHERMAN: Ah, medium. Moderate.

LEVINE: Moderate, uh-huh. So did they try to hold onto the old ways, the ways that they had in Europe or did they want to become Americanized? Do you remember what their attitudes were?

SHERMAN: My mother lit candles and she kept a kosher house. The candles are on the buffet there.

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness. These came from Poland?

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: Wow. Huh. So—so you—you were bar mitzvahed and you—

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Now—

SHERMAN: Those candles are actually made in England, but they were purchased in Poland.

LEVINE: Oh. Hmm. So you went through high school, through college, all in Chicago?

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and then after you graduated from pharmacy school, what was your first position?

SHERMAN: Well, it was difficult finding jobs. This was in the great Depression and I managed to get two or three small jobs until finally I was hired by the Veteran's Administration in 1938.

LEVINE: Hmm, and did you stay with them?

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: So in other words, you would be like in a VA hospital in the pharmacy?

SHERMAN: That's it, in the VA hospital in Milwaukee.

LEVINE: I see.

SHERMAN: That is—that is how come I migrated to Milwaukee.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, I see. So let's see—so you were a pharmacist by the time World War II was underway?

SHERMAN: That's right, I was with the VA hospital in Milwaukee from 1938 until 1968, with the exception of four years of army service during World War II.

LEVINE: Did you join the army?

SHERMAN: No, I was drafted.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how—where did you serve and in what capacity?

SHERMAN: I was with a station hospital in the Army Medical Corps and I spent twenty-five months in Europe, six months in Ireland, six months in England, six months in France and six months in Germany.

LEVINE: Hmm, and what were your duties? What—what—

SHERMAN: I was a pharmacist.

LEVINE: You were a pharmacist there, uh-huh. I see, and how do you remember that period of your life, that army period where you were—

SHERMAN: Well, I was always thankful I was not in the front lines. When General Yodel surrendered, we were still in France in a local named [unclear] that is near Ries. After they surrendered, we invaded Germany.

LEVINE: Ah. Now, did you have relatives—were you in any contact or was your mother in contact with her sister prior to the Holocaust?

SHERMAN: Prior to the Holocaust? My aunt lived—first she lived in town by the name of Vishlitza [PH] and then she moved to a town by the name Kinemics and in Knienich she met her—met her death. She and her husband and seven children.

LEVINE: This is in Poland? [unclear].

SHERMAN: They were all murdered. [coughs]

LEVINE: Let's see.

SHERMAN: My father had ten brothers and sisters who were all murdered by the cultured Germans.

LEVINE: Did you, when you were there, you didn't have any contact after—when the war was over, did you just come right back?

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: Okay, so then—

SHERMAN: For three months. The VA permitted me three months to return to my job.

LEVINE: Oh.

SHERMAN: So for three months I tried the retail trade again. I had a job with the Horne Prescription Pharmacy in Chicago, but then I returned to the VA in Milwaukee.

LEVINE: Why did you decide that? You—

SHERMAN: I preferred hospital work.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. Okay, so then you stayed there until you retired?

SHERMAN: No, I retired in 1968. Since then I have been with the Blue Mound Health Clinic plus Milwaukee County Hospital and I retired from Milwaukee County Hospital in 1982.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-hmm. So you keep going with the other one? Do you keep—the Milwaukee clinic? What did you say? The—

SHERMAN: Blue Mound Health Clinic.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: No.

SHERMAN: Can't be in two places at one time.

LEVINE: I see, so what do you—when you look back on your life, what do you find that you're satisfied about having done? What makes you feel a sense of satisfaction?

SHERMAN: Sense of satisfaction is pharmacy. I'm a life member of the American Pharmaceutical Association. The most satisfaction is getting married to my wife Angeline. She passed away in 1990.

LEVINE: Oh. And what was her name—her maiden name? Saxe. Angeline Saxe.

SHERMAN: S-A-X?

LEVINE: S-A-X-E.

SHERMAN: S-A-X-E, fancy.

LEVINE: [chuckles] And did you have children?

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: No, uh-huh. And let's see. Is there—when you think about immigrating here as a young child, do you think that made a difference to you in your life later on? The fact that you started out in Poland and you came here at a young age? Do you think that made a difference, that you had immigrated to this country?

SHERMAN: Well, I'm very pleased that we did immigrate.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SHERMAN: Especially a neighbor little girl threw me down the steps. I remember that.

LEVINE: In Poland?

SHERMAN: That's right, she threw me down the steps and said in Polish "Schitt," which all that it means is Jew.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you, even at that young age, you experienced anti-Semitism in Poland.

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: Before you came. Uh-hmm. How about this period in your life, now that you're retired and you—you don't have to go and work and—how is this time?

SHERMAN: I still keep up my pharmacy through pharmacy journals.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, it sounds like you—you were pleased with the decision you made.

SHERMAN: Oh, that's right. It was my ambition to become a pharmacist from childhood on.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. I imagine your mother and father were proud of that fact, as well.

SHERMAN: One incident I do remember is I took out all the medicine from the medicine chest and poured them into a—a—a pan and my reward was a whipping. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] How old were you then?

SHERMAN: I don't remember exactly, but I was playing pharmacist.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, I—you—you're not sure how you got this form. Have you visited Ellis Island—

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: Since you went through it as a little boy?

SHERMAN: No.

LEVINE: No, uh-huh. Okay.

SHERMAN: Just before entering school, my mother took for a visit to New York. She had two brothers in New York and I visited an aquarium and a button on my sweater got caught in a fence and I thought one of the fish jumped out at me, and I had a frightful tantrum. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] Wow. So were you around a lot of people who had come from Poland, growing up? Were there lots of families who had also

just come to this country? Do you remember like 'greenhorns'? Do you remember people like just coming to the country and being new?

SHERMAN: No, I don't but my father had friends from Pabunitza. I really didn't have much to do with them. I knew them. I knew their children. They were the Newmans, the Blumes, the Bilskys, the Novaks, the Zeltzes.

LEVINE: Do you remember what kind of social life your mother and father had once they got here? Did they get together with these people? Did they have—did they get together for certain occasions or—

SHERMAN: Well, the only one was my Uncle Sam. We spent a lot of time at his place and we also had some second cousins also in Chicago that I visited. We visited them. I remember throwing a top into my uncle's commode. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] Huh.

SHERMAN: And he had to call a plumber.

LEVINE: And you actually didn't come to Milwaukee until you were already a pharmacist, so—

SHERMAN: That's right. I took a civil service exam and I placed first in the central states. I took the exam in 1933 and it took five years before they called me to Milwaukee.

LEVINE: And how as Milwaukee compared with Chicago, when you first came to Milwaukee to live? Were you married at—

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGIN SIDE B]

SHERMAN: --the only thing I missed was a major league baseball team and now we do have a major league baseball team.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. So how did you meet your wife?

SHERMAN: Through—through an acquaintance.

LEVINE: Here in Milwaukee?

SHERMAN: That's right. I worked with another pharmacist and his wife recommended I call Angeline and then my goose was cooked. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] So did you like her right away?

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, is there anything else you can think of that has to do with coming to this country? Do you consider your—you consider yourself Jewish and American?

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: But not Polish at all?

SHERMAN: Well, in a way. My father said that some ancestor owned an estate. The name of the estate was Serbutka. [PH]I once found it in [unclear], Polish National Alliance. That there is such an estate and included—the estate was so large that it included four villages. One of the village was Sumutka. [PH]That's the derivation of my genuine surname.

LEVINE: I see. So you—you expect that you have Polish blood in your background.

SHERMAN: Not really. My father had a cousin in Racide [PH] corroborated the story, but she said that the story should have quotation marks around it as a story. Nobody knew who had the estate, but her maiden name was the same, Sumutka.

LEVINE: Wow. Hmm. Well, do you have any feeling about the immigrants who are coming to the country today?

SHERMAN: No. To the world, the USA is still the golden land. The land of freedom. [pause]

LEVINE: Well, I think maybe that's a very good place to end. I mean that—that's why you came here, or your family did.

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Okay, well, I want to thank you very much.

SHERMAN: The land of opportunity.

LEVINE: And it—and it has been that for you. Yes, that's wonderful. Okay, I've been speaking with Louis Charles Sherman, who came from Poland in 1917 when he was four years of age. He is eighty-four at the time of this interview and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off. [tape off/on] We have an addendum here. Go ahead, Mr. Sherman.

SHERMAN: The interviewer is beautiful.

LEVINE: Oh, thank you. Thank you. [Laughs] [tape off/on] I'm putting the tape back on because we—Mr. Sherman just mentioned something about the Settlement House in Chicago where his father was conscripted for—

SHERMAN: Registered. Registered for the draft in World War I. It was called the Eleanor Club. It was elected on Leavitt and Lemoyne Streets in Chicago.

LEVINE: And can you think of any other activities that took place in that club?

SHERMAN: Actually, it was a residence for employed girls. But they maintained a library and a playroom while my mother—my father was registering for the draft on the first floor, I made my way to the basement and played in the gym. I remember climbing on a gymnastic horse.

LEVINE: Now, was this for any particular ethnic group or who went to this club? This settlement house?

SHERMAN: The neighbors in the vicinity. They had the regular branch of the Chicago Public Library. You had to have a library card. I don't remember that when my father registered, but later on. Later on I visited the Eleanor Club for games and books.

LEVINE: Hmm. Did they have social events like dances and things like that, do you know?

SHERMAN: I don't think so.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Uh-huh. So did your father—did your father go into World War I? Was your father in World War I?

SHERMAN: He was not drafted.

LEVINE: No?

SHERMAN: He was a veteran of the Russian Army in the Russian Japanese War.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Wow. And what was your father like? We didn't really talk abut him. What kind of a man was he? How do you recall him?

SHERMAN: He was short like me, five feet tall.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHERMAN: He looked like Rodney Dangerfield.

LEVINE: Do you think he missed being a weaver?

SHERMAN: Well, that's what he was trained from a youth on. In Poland they had apprenticeships. You apprenticed to—if you were apprenticed to a weaver, you became a weaver.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHERMAN: It was a hand loom.

LEVINE: Do you think he was—he was—do you think he had a good life here in this country, your father?

SHERMAN: I think so.

LEVINE: And then by the time World War II came along, he was probably old enough that he was not drafted.

SHERMAN: No, my father—

LEVINE: But you mentioned earlier—

SHERMAN: My father was born in 1884.

LEVINE: And you mentioned your mother took a job in a cannery.

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: Talk about that—was during World War II?

SHERMAN: That's right. Of course, I was in the service during that time, so I don't know which company. At any rate, that's how he garnered a social security number.

LEVINE: So by the time you came home from the service, was she still working there or she had stopped?

SHERMAN: No. She had broken her hip. The hip was set by a pin.

LEVINE: Okay, and you did talk a little bit about the Depression because that was when you finished pharmacy school.

SHERMAN: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: It was still Depression time.

SHERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: Is there anything else about the Depression in Chicago or how it effected your family in particular that you can recall?

SHERMAN: Well, we didn't live the life of Riley, but we managed. [pause] By 1933 and 1934, those were the years of the Chicago World Fair. By that time I did manage to get a fulltime job.

LEVINE: This was a job connected with the Worlds Fair?

SHERMAN: No, in pharmacy.

LEVINE: Oh, in pharmacy you did. And—and what do you remember about the Worlds Fair?

SHERMAN: Not really, I was busy in the pharmacy.

LEVINE: Busy in the pharmacy, uh-huh. Okay. Okay, I think we can stop here.

SHERMAN: It was long hours. I used to report at two in the afternoon and work until twelve midnight. On Saturday until one a.m. and I started at twenty-one dollars. I got—got raises up to twenty-five, then the store was foreclosed on a chattel mortgage.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Well, that must have been quite a time during the Depression.

SHERMAN: It—it was a large drugstore. We had a long fountain luncheon counter. We had two cooks, served meals. But the store went broke.

LEVINE: I suppose that wasn't so unusual at that time.

SHERMAN: No. There were a lot of fore—foreclosures.

LEVINE: Okay, well, I think we'll stop here and this is Janet Levine signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]