

EI-847

LUCY VAN MIDDELEM BROOKS

BIRTHDATE: FEBRUARY 4, 1916

INTERVIEW DATE: FEBRUARY 18, 1997

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 81

RUNNING TIME: 45:40

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE

RECORDING ENGINEER: JANET LEVINE

INTERVIEW LOCATION: STUART, FLORIDA

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

BELGIUM, 1920

AGE: 4

SHIP: THE AQUITANIA

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Okay, today is February 18, 1997 and I'm here in Stuart, Florida with Mr. and Mrs. Brooks, who—Mrs. Brooks, who was Lucy Van Middlelem.

BROOKS: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Came from Belgium at the age of four in 1920. At the time of this interview Mrs. Brooks is 81 years of age. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. If you would say for the tape, please, again, your—your maiden name, your birth date and where in Belgium you were born.

BROOKS: My name is Lucy Van Middlelem Brooks. I was born in Bruges [PH], Belgium on February 4th, 1916.

LEVINE: Okay. And did the family live in Bruges up until the time you left for America?

BROOKS: Yes, uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, maybe you could—well, first, what was your father's name?

BROOKS: Camiel—C-A-M-I-E-L.

LEVINE: Okay. And just fill—fill us in a little bit on the family. Your father came to the United States earlier and—

BROOKS: My father had come to the United States, we figure, about 1912, maybe. No, not 1912. About 1908 or '06 and he lived in Rochester, New York where he worked on the trolleys.

LEVINE: Oh.

BROOKS: And he decided it was time he got married so he went back to Belgium about in 1910 to get married, to find a Belgian girl to marry.

LEVINE: Do you know why he was so set on a Belgian girl? [laughter]

BROOKS: [laughs] I don't. But anyway, he met—

MR. BROOKS: I can tell you.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Go ahead.

BROOKS: He met my mother and they evidently fell in love and he wanted to get married to her. And her parents said no, she was too young.

LEVINE: How old was she?

BROOKS: She was 16.

LEVINE: And your father at that time?

BROOKS: He was—he was 10 years older than her so he was, say, about 26 or 7.

LEVINE: Why—let's just get the whole story. Why, Mr. Brooks, did he want a Belgium wife?

MR. BROOKS: Well, in the case of wanted a Belgium wife, I just wanted that one.

BROOKS: Oh, [unclear] [laughs]

EI-847/BROOKS

- LEVINE: Now, did he know your mother before he went back?
- BROOKS: No.
- LEVINE: No. Okay. Then when you say he worked on the trolleys, did he drive the trolleys?
- BROOKS: He was a trolley car driver. Uh-hmm. And my second son, who's into genealogy, went to Rochester and found some history of that.
- LEVINE: Now, when your father went to Rochester, did he have family or friends in Rochester?
- BROOKS: I don't—I don't know.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh.
- BROOKS: I don't know that. But anyway, he went back to Rochester for two years and came back to Belgium in 1912. And then they were going to get married and my grandmother—my mother's mother died. So they didn't get married to—for a year because of the mourning period. So they had to wait then till 1913 to get married. And then my mother said, "Oh, I can't bear to leave—you know, leave my family, my sisters and brothers and my father." So while they were discussing this and arguing about this, the war broke out, and they had German soldiers billeted in their home for four years.
- LEVINE: Wow. Now, at that time they were married but they had no children?
- BROOKS: Well, my sister—my older sister was born in 1914.
- LEVINE: Okay. And were they living with either parent or—
- BROOKS: No, they were—they had—
- LEVINE: They had their own home?
- BROOKS: They had a house in Bruges and my father worked on the trolley cars in Belgium.
- LEVINE: Oh, he worked—
- BROOKS: Yeah.
- LEVINE: —in Belgium on the trolley cars too.

BROOKS: And actually, one interesting thing that he told us, when the war ended, as the German soldiers retreated from Belgium, they took all males over 13 years with them to Germany, because they didn't want them rising up against them.

LEVINE: They took them as prisoners or—

BROOKS: They took them as prisoners under guard and they were walking back to Germany. Well, my father walked with them for 24 hours and then he decided he'd had enough of that. He was going back to his wife and children. So he turned around and walked back to Bruges and my they—my mother had to hide him in the attic.

LEVINE: He must have had to hide and—

BROOKS: He evidently did but he did it.

LEVINE: What was your mother's name?

BROOKS: Hermina [PH].

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

BROOKS: Schotte—Schotte.

LEVINE: S-C-O-T?

BROOKS: S-C-H-O-T-T-E. They called it Sausse. So, of course, by the time the war ended my mother and father had three children.

LEVINE: I see. You mentioned on your questionnaire that the soldiers that—who were billeted in your house—

BROOKS: They shared their food packages with my family.

LEVINE: So it was not an unpleasant ex—

BROOKS: No.

LEVINE: I mean, except for the fact that having—

BROOKS: The first German soldier my mother saw was leaning over the baby's carriage, my sister's baby carriage. And of course, my mother had heard all these atrocity stories. And the man said that he wouldn't hurt the baby.

LEVINE: So they lived in—in a—in a rather harmonious—

BROOKS: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: —way for those years?

BROOKS: They lived in harmony. They, as I said, shared their food packages with us. My mother, when she found she was pregnant with me, had to go—she said had to go to the German doctor and strip and show she was—you know, prove she was pregnant to get a food allotment for the—for her to have. But she always said that it was due to the—

LEVINE: Take your time.

BROOKS: —the American Red Cross that provided dry milk and food for babies, that that's the reason I lived, because my father said I would fit in the coffee pot when I was a year old; I was so little. But anyway, when the war ended my—my father said, "Well, now, I am going back to the United States. And what are you going to do?" And she said, "Well, I'm going with you."

LEVINE: Now, did you have grandparents living anywhere nearby?

BROOKS: I had one grandfather. My mother's father was still living. My father was one of the younger members of his family and his grandparents had both died before I was born.

LEVINE: His parents.

BROOKS: His parents.

LEVINE: And do you remember that grandfather?

BROOKS: Yeah, the—I remember when we left Belgium, when we went to the ferry to go to England I can remember my mother standing there crying and my grandfather—

LEVINE: When—do you have any memories of life in Belgium before the family—

BROOKS: The only thing I remember, and it seems a silly thing to remember, it was—must have been the day my brother, who was born in 1919—he was a baby when we came to the United States—my brother, the day he was baptized, I can remember my sister and I

were all dressed up and that I, somehow or other, got blood on my white dress. [laughter] But anyway, when we—when we left Belgium, there evidently were a couple other couples from Belgium that went with my mother and father that were friends of theirs. They went to Michigan; I remember that.

LEVINE: Oh, so you traveled on the same ship?

BROOKS: We went on the same—we went from Austan [PH] to Dover, and to London and stayed overnight in London, and then took the train to Southampton and disembarked from Southampton. And on the—the—another silly memory I have is from—on that train from London to Southampton I was in a compartment with one of the other couples. And my mother—the whole ride—you know, the trains had separate doors. You couldn't go from compartment to compartment. She was frantic that I wasn't on the train. But I was. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, good. [chuckles] How about—what did you—do you know—did your mother and father sell their house or get rid of all their things?

BROOKS: No, I think they—they rented but I don't remember what they did with their furnishings.

LEVINE: Do you recall anything that your mother packed to take with you?

BROOKS: Yes, I remember vividly, not remembering from the packing but remembering from when I was growing up, my mother and father had two big volumes of books that depicted scenes of the war, what the Belgians went through during the war. And I don't—never knew what happened to those, because we went back to Belgium to visit in 1927—

LEVINE: Right.

BROOKS: And whether my mother gave them away to someone at that time, I don't remember.

LEVINE: Do you have any memories of—of the German soldiers you saw?

BROOKS: No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Okay, so you traveled with this other family. You were going to Michigan.

BROOKS: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And do you recall anything before you got to the ship? I mean, anything on that journey [unclear]?

BROOKS: No, no, except, as I say, that I was with them in their compartment and—and they had no children, the—this—I think it was two other couples, as I remember, because my mother corresponded with them for years. But they were not related—just, evidently, acquaintances.

LEVINE: Okay. And then you got—you got to Southampton.

BROOKS: No, Riverhead.

LEVINE: Well, before you came

BROOKS: Oh, yeah. Uh-hmm. Southampton, England.

LEVINE: Right. And did you stay there? Do you know if the family stayed in Southampton?

BROOKS: No, I think we—we disembarked immediately.

LEVINE: Okay. All right. Then, how about the passage?

BROOKS: I remember very little about that.

LEVINE: Okay. And do you remember when the ship came into the New York harbor?

BROOKS: Yes. I can remember seeing the skyline and the Statue of Liberty and—of course, it didn't mean much to us then—and going to Ellis Island. And, as I say, it might have been the day before election day. But anyway, we were held over because of election day. And then when they examined us, my brother, who was about 14 months, had a teething rash. And they said that that was the beginning of measles and that we would have to stay or, alternatively, my mother and father and my sister and I could come into the United States and he could go back to Belgium alone. Of course, that was not in the picture as far as my parents were concerned. So we all stayed at Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Now, can you remember that or do you remember your mother and father talking about it?

- BROOKS: I can remember them talking about it but I can remember the bigness of Ellis Island, of the building, and the beds were—were like, just metal beds, you know, with hardly any covers on. And my father couldn't stay with us. He was in evidently a men's section. And I can remember how awful the food was. [laughs] That's my most vivid memory.
- LEVINE: In particular?
- BROOKS: The hard-boiled eggs that were green and not—well, you remember—of course, you don't remember but years ago they sold eggs, A, B and C. You know, the A—A's—A eggs were the freshest and the B were the less fresh. And the—I'm sure these were all C eggs.
- LEVINE: And the cleanliness of Ellis Island? Can you remember?
- BROOKS: I don't remember too much about that.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh. And do you remember how you were treated?
- BROOKS: I guess we were treated all right, except that my father had train tickets to Riverhead. And a couple of the men tried to get him to turn those in and said, "You can go out there by subway."
- LEVINE: These were—
- BROOKS: New York people.
- LEVINE: —employees.
- BROOKS: Employees—
- LEVINE: Uh-huh.
- BROOKS: —who probably never been outside of New York itself. People don't realize how big Long Island is.
- LEVINE: But your father—
- BROOKS: You know, he said, "My—my brother told me to get—use the train tickets and"—he had a brother living in—in the Riverhead area.
- LEVINE: So, let's see. So when you got—did—did someone meet you? Oh, no. Nobody met you.

EI-847/BROOKS

BROOKS: No. No one—

LEVINE: The family traveled together—

BROOKS: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

LEVINE: —and it was you, your brother, sister, mother and father.

BROOKS: Right.

LEVINE: And so you got on the train and do you remember anything about first impressions as a little four-year-old?

BROOKS: No, no.

LEVINE: Okay. And when you got to Riverhead, your uncle met you?

BROOKS: He—he met us in horse and wagon and we went—he'd evidently arranged a house for us. My father was going to work on a duck farm and we had this house that was right on the duck farm. And that's where we lived for about five years.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, had your uncle had a duck farm—

BROOKS: No, he—

LEVINE: —in Belgium?

BROOKS: No, no.

LEVINE: This was a new occupation for him?

BROOKS: He worked on a duck farm in—it was in Acubog [PH], Long Island, actually, which is right outside of Riverhead.

LEVINE: But he hadn't work on a duck farm—

BROOKS: No.

LEVINE: —before coming to this country?

BROOKS: And neither had my father.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Wow. Now, how did you—let's see. Did you start school at five?

BROOKS: My sister had already been in school in Belgium because she was six. And I—well, I was still four so I didn't start school till the next year.

LEVINE: How was learning English for you?

BROOKS: It just seemed to come naturally, you know.

LEVINE: And you mentioned that—that you had a—there was a family nearby that—

BROOKS: There was a family—from where we lived on the farm, we had to walk maybe a half a mile to the main road to where we walked to school. And this—this family lived right on the corner and they had eight children. And they just took us in, like under their wing, you know, and we—we were friends with them for—for the rest of our lives.

LEVINE: Now, were there many immigrant families nearby—

BROOKS: No.

LEVINE: —that you recall?

BROOKS: No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And—

BROOKS: There was one Belgian family in Riverhead that my mother and father were friends with. But I don't remember what happened to them, whether they left the area. I can just remember visiting them when I was little.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how was—how was it for your mother, coming to America?

BROOKS: Well, it was probably very lonesome for my mother, except she had three children and became friends also with this family. And as I say, when we went to go grocery shopping, my father translated for her, wrote the grocery order out. We went in, walked—walked to the village of Riverhead and got our groceries and came home carrying them.

LEVINE: Can you describe Riverhead, just to give an idea of what it was like?

- BROOKS: Well, it was just like a little—little country town at the time. It had a—a grammar school that encompassed the high school, that one building. So I can't remember exactly when we went to the—why we changed from the Acubo [PH] School to the Riverhead School. But I know I went there from the third grade on. And at that time they had built a high school so that the grammar school was in one building and the high school in another building. And it was the county seat, just a little town where you could walk around, didn't have to be afraid of anybody.
- LEVINE: A few shops and—
- BROOKS: A few stores. No shopping centers.
- LEVINE: Now—so, actually, the family moved from a city to a—to a smaller rural—
- BROOKS: Right.
- LEVINE: —place in coming to this country. Uh-huh. Okay. How about religion? Had your family been religious—
- BROOKS: Yes.
- LEVINE: —and did you continue—
- BROOKS: My family was Catholic. Belgium is predominantly Catholic. And we went to the Catholic Church in Riverhead with this family who—they were Irish—not—not a—
- LEVINE: They hadn't immigrated.
- BROOKS: No.
- LEVINE: They were born there but they were Irish.
- BROOKS: They were from Irish descent, you might say. But in—we had a great time in Riverhead. When we—and then in 1927—oh, wait. First of all, let me show you—
- LEVINE: Wait, wait. You're hooked up here.
- BROOKS: Oh, get that thing that Richard got for me. It's hanging on the wall there. My father, when he—

MR. BROOKS: What are you talking about?

BROOKS: The thing for my father on—when—when my father had been in Rochester, he'd gone for his citizenship papers but never stayed long enough to get his papers.

MR. BROOKS: Is it this thing here?

BROOKS: Yeah. So when he got to Riverhead—my son is, as I say, a hist—history buff.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BROOKS: This was—if you look at the date, it's November, 1920.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BROOKS: And he had arrived in October, 1920 when he went to apply for his citizenship papers.

LEVINE: Oh, so he was able to become a citizen right after he got back.

BROOKS: Well, no. It took—it took, at that time, five years.

LEVINE: Right.

BROOKS: And at the time, the law was that your wife and children would become naturalized with you.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BROOKS: Well, just about when—the 1925 date when he was to get his papers, the law was changed and said it didn't include the wife.

LEVINE: Oh.

BROOKS: So my father had gone to the courthouse and they said, "Well, it was your intent that your wife be on that so we'll grant her citizenship papers at the same time."

LEVINE: But in other words, since you—you got—you—you arrived in November.

BROOKS: We—yeah, we—

LEVINE: —1920.

BROOKS: Right.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. Okay. Uh-huh. So the family then all became citizens on your father's papers.

BROOKS: Right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BROOKS: And—

LEVINE: Did—do you remember that day when your father became a citizen?

BROOKS: No, I don't, because, see, that was in 1925 that he became a citizen. I remember, you know, I guess he just went to the courthouse himself.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BROOKS: But in 1927 my—my—the whole family went to Belgium on a trip.

LEVINE: Okay, before you talk about that, just a few other things. Was your mother trying to maintain some Belgium customs and habits and attitudes or was she—

BROOKS: You mean—

LEVINE: —try—or was the attitude to become American? Do you recall that?

BROOKS: You mean to make us keep the language?

LEVINE: Yeah, the language and any other food, whatever.

BROOKS: No. Well, I'm sure she cooked Belgian recipes and things like that, but mainly at home we—we spoke English.

LEVINE: I see.

BROOKS: You know.

LEVINE: Do you remember any Belgium dishes that she prepared?

BROOKS: Well, one thing I remember is she—she made a raisin bread, that in my eyes, you know, looked like it was this round. And I can see her holding it and slicing it this way.

LEVINE: About—

BROOKS: Great big, long slices.

LEVINE: —three feet long.

BROOKS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BROOKS: And—and she made French fries, the old fashioned—

LEVINE: How's that?

BROOKS: Well, you—you don't just get frozen [chuckles] fries at a—

LEVINE: You mean she cut the—up the potatoes?

BROOKS: Cut them up and fried them little and then heated the oil again and fried them again so that they were very crisp and delicious.

LEVINE: Huh. Uh-huh. How about clothing? Did your mother sew?

BROOKS: No, she didn't sew.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BROOKS: No, I—we got our clothes through Sears and Roebuck or Montgomery catalog. [laughs]

LEVINE: Now, that was probably pretty typical of the [unclear].

BROOKS: Oh, yeah. Right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. [knocking sound] Whoops. We're going to pause here for a second. [tape off/on]

BROOKS: You were asking me—

LEVINE: [unclear]

- BROOKS: —whether there were any special dishes my mother prepared. I was telling her about the ra—the raisin bread Mom made, you know.
- MARY: Oh, yeah. Yeah.
- BROOKS: Sliced—wasn't it that big?
- MARY: Oh, big. Yeah.
- BROOKS: Yeah.
- LEVINE: And the French fries.
- BROOKS: And the French fries.
- MARY: Oh, yes.
- LEVINE: And so, do you recall, as a little girl, what your mother and father did for a social life or for entertainment or leisure or—
- BROOKS: No. As I said, there was another Belgian family in—in Riverhead and they were friendly with them. And they were friendly with this family that lived near us. And then, as the years progressed, they made other friends. But social life wasn't a high point in those days, any more than—like, eating out was unheard of, you know. You ate at home. If you had an ice cream out; that was great. [chuckles]
- LEVINE: And how did things work out at the duck farm for your father?
- BROOKS: Good. And Mary was born in that house we first lived in.
- LEVINE: In Riverhead?
- BROOKS: In Acubog.
- LEVINE: Oh, okay.
- BROOKS: Then afterwards, we moved to Riverhead in—to another duck farm my father worked at. And as I say, then in 1927 we were going to go to Belgium.
- LEVINE: Now, why did the family decide to go back to Belgium [unclear]?

BROOKS: Well, I think in their heart they wanted to go back and stay. Now, Mary was about three years old and Charlie and I were in—in school. I was 11 and my older sister, who was 13, was very grown up already. I was still a little girl. And when we got to Belgium my older sister, right away, went with the older cousins and had a great time and loved it. My brother, who was quite a shy person—wouldn't you say?

MARY: Yes.

BROOKS: He had to go to a school just for boys. And my sister and I went to a school just for girls.

LEVINE: Was this a—a public school or a Catholic school?

BROOKS: Catholic school. I can't remember that they had public schools at—but anyway, Charlie and I hated it.

LEVINE: And why did you hate it?

BROOKS: Oh, I hated it because I missed my friends and I didn't like the Old Country attitude, you know.

LEVINE: What—can you—can you—

BROOKS: Well, we went—

LEVINE: —[unclear] what it was about the attitudes that—

BROOKS: We went over in April of 1927. And before we went, though, my mother had gotten our report cards that we were promoted if we—in the event we came back. But they—I don't think they had planned to come back. But anyway—how do you recall that, Mary? The same way?

MARY: Well, I remember, you know, practically nothing.

BROOKS: Yeah, yeah. So anyway, as the months progressed that we were there, I—I think my mother and father found out that they were better off in the United States.

LEVINE: Did your father go back to work during those months?

BROOKS: He—he, as I remember, drove tourists in, like, an open bus to the—to the war sites.

LEVINE: The World War I sites.

BROOKS: Right. And my mother and father, they had rented for that summer a villa that had three or four apartments in it, which they rented out. You know, we used one and then the others were rented to summer people. They lived in a—a town called Knokke—

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

BROOKS: K-N-O-C-K-K-E. I don't think the Belgians put the c in it. I think they just put K-N-O-K-K-E, which was right on the North Sea. And anyway, in August we—we came back.

LEVINE: So you and your brother disliked it and—but you think the decision was also that your mother and father felt—

BROOKS: Yeah, I think they felt we'd be better off in the United States.

LEVINE: Now, was your grandfather still alive when you went there?

BROOKS: No, no.

MR. BROOKS: [unclear].

BROOKS: No, my fa—my grandfather had died, I think, about in 1923.

LEVINE: I see. So there was not family.

BROOKS: Well, yeah. My mother had sisters and brothers and anyway, coming back, we came on another Cunard Line. And I remember that vividly and coming into New York. We were just elated, you know, to see the Statue of Liberty and, of course, then you didn't go to Ellis Island because we were citizens. I don't know whether they still had that program at that time.

LEVINE: Yes, they did.

BROOKS: Yeah.

LEVINE: So—so then, where did you go when you came back [unclear]?

BROOKS: Then we went—we went in—to—back to Riverhead and rented a house. And my mother and father looked around and bought a lot and built a house. And then we lived there.

LEVINE: Now, your father didn't actually build it. He had it built.

BROOKS: No, he had it built.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BROOKS: Yeah, had a builder build a house.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And—and your father then worked at—at a duck farm?

BROOKS: No. At that time, he started his own business, kind of being a [unclear] salesman. You know, selling ducks and supplies to restaurants and—

LEVINE: And how did you feel when you got back?

BROOKS: Oh, wonderful. And the house my mother and father built, my—my sister's son lives there now.

MARY: Oh yeah. [laughs] That's true. Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. So did you—then what? You were still in grade school?

BROOKS: I was still in grade school. Then we went on to high school there in Riverhead and graduated. My older sister got married shortly after graduation and—well, no. In October, my mother had another baby. And then in December, Jen got married. My sister got married. So she got a son and son-in-law within, like, two months. And then my—my brother and I and Mary all went to school in Riverhead and graduate—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

BROOKS: —'27. As I said, I was still a little girl. So I had two suitcases with me. One was filled with dolls and the other one was filled with books. And the books came from that family that lived near us that I said—they had a big house. And in the attic there must have been, well, I'll say a thousand—there probably was 5,000 books. And they let us just go up there and lay on the floor or take any books home we wanted. But anyway, when I went to Belgium I had a suitcase full of books.

LEVINE: Do you recall any of the particular books that—

BROOKS: Well, "Heidi" and "The Girl Limberlost [PH]" and, you know, the—

LEVINE: Books that a—what, you were about 13 or—

BROOKS: No, I was 11.

LEVINE: Eleven—an 11-year-old would like, yeah.

BROOKS: Yeah. But anyway, then when Charlie went—when the war ended he was in Germany. And he wanted to go back to Belgium to—

LEVINE: Well, tell the story about the—the dolls on the [unclear].

BROOKS: Oh, anyway, the dolls were—every night I put them out on my bed, or every morning, I should say. And the [unclear] said to my father, “Mr. Van Middlem, you didn’t pay for all your children.” And he said, “Oh, yes, I did. They all have tickets.” And he said, “Well, come with me and I’ll show you.” And he opened our door and here was all these—[laughs] they had a good laugh over it.

LEVINE: Do you have those dolls?

BROOKS: No. [chuckles]

LEVINE: So when you thought you were leaving the United States forever, you brought books and dolls. And do you remember anything else you brought or anything else [unclear]—

BROOKS: No. But it was the summer—there had been a tremendous murder case, Snyder [PH]. Do you remember that, Mary?

MARY: Oh—

BROOKS: Ruth Snyder.

MARY: [unclear].

BROOKS: Anyway, my—one of mother’s friends sent her papers from the United States with all the stuff about the—this murder case that was going on in the United States at that time.

MARY: And I think that’s when our mother got rid of her homesickness—

BROOKS: Yeah, yeah.

MARY: —for her own country and was willing to come back and make this her country.

- BROOKS: Then when—as I go back to the war, when my brother—when the war ended he went to Belgium and he arrived in Bruges at night, in the evening, evidently. And of course he had no way of contacting family so he went to the British Officer’s Club and went in and said, you know, “Could I get a room?” And they said, “Well, no. This is only for British officers, sir.” And my father said—I mean, my brother said, “Well, I was born in Belgium and I’m an American soldier, as you can see. And I’m here to look for my family.” “Oh, don’t say another word. Come on in.” And they made him welcome and gave him a room. And then the next day he found some of our family. And one of my cousins that I visited when we were there a couple of years ago, he said to me that he was 13 at the time—and he said, “This handsome cousin from the United States and an officer”—he said, “he had to go to school with me.” He took him to school to show him off to his friends. [laughter]
- LEVINE: Uh-huh.
- BROOKS: So that’s about it.
- LEVINE: Okay. Well, now, you finished high school then here in this country?
- BROOKS: Oh, yeah.
- LEVINE: And then what did you do after that?
- BROOKS: Well, I went to Ryder—Ryder College in Trenton. I took a secretarial course, which was about a year and a half, supposedly. And I tell my grandchildren this, that I worked for my room and board.
- LEVINE: Yeah. What did you do?
- BROOKS: Lived in a house and helped take care of the children. I remember one Sat—the first Saturday I was there the lady said, “Well, would you scrub the kitchen?” And I said, “Well, I’ll be glad to do it if you’ll show—tell me what you want me to do.”
- MARY: Show me, not help.
- BROOKS: Yeah. [laughs] So she showed me what had to be done and I did it. And they gave me 10 cents a day for the bus fare to go to the college. And I saved that 10 cents a day. I ran. And then I saved that money to go—go home by train. [laughs]

LEVINE: So then did you work as a secretary when you got out?

BROOKS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Where was that?

BROOKS: Well, I finished the course in a year. So I—I didn't have money to stay for my graduation. I didn't even have money to get my diploma, though I had my record complete. And I went home, like, in end of August thinking that in September after Labor Day I'd go into New York to look for a job. But as it was, during that period I found a job right in my hometown in the high school. And I worked there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Then when did you meet your husband?

BROOKS: Oh, I had met him when I was in high school.

LEVINE: Oh.

BROOKS: So then we got back together again and two years later got married.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And your husband's name?

BROOKS: My husband's name is Gordon Elliot Brooks—

LEVINE: And—

BROOKS: —and he was born in Orian [PH], Long Island, New York. And his date of birth is October 29, 1914. And we've been married—we had our 60th wedding anniversary this summer.

MARY: [laughs] Yeah, last summer.

BROOKS: Well, the—the last anniversary.

LEVINE: And children? Do you have children?

BROOKS: We have four children.

LEVINE: And their names?

BROOKS: Our oldest son is John Gordon Brooks and his birthday is May 30th, 1937. Our second son is Richard Eugene Brooks and his birthday

is October 1, 1939. Our third son is Gregory Van Middlem Brooks. I always told him he wouldn't know how to spell his whole name till he was in high—in college. And his date of birth is September 14th, 1946. And we have one daughter, Sylvia Alma—I won't give you her—all her names—

LEVINE: Okay. [chuckles]

BROOKS: —Brooks Wilson, who was born October 18, 1948. We have 17 grandchildren and 10 great grandchildren at the present time.

LEVINE: [unclear] [laughter] But when you think back on coming to this country as a little girl and having the chance to go back and try out Belgium again, how do you think about that [unclear]?

BROOKS: I'm glad I'm here. We—as I—I started to tell you before, my—when my granddaughter, April, went to Oxford, her mother and father visited there. And then when my daughter came home she said, "I am going to give you a ticket to go to Belgium. If Dad wants to go, he can buy his own ticket." And anyway, Dad said, yes, he wanted to go. So—

MR. BROOKS: That's how they treated the old man. [laughter]

BROOKS: So anyway, as I—I was telling someone this and they said, "Yeah, but wasn't it nice that she let you come back?" [laughs] But anyway, we went to Belgium. April was still there at Oxford and she met us at Gatwick that morning and took us around. And we went through Oxford and London. And then we all went to Belgium; she went with us. She was kind of our tour guide.

LEVINE: How was that for you to be back in Belgium after all this time?

BROOKS: It was very touching. You know, it just seemed strange and, yet, familiar.

MR. BROOKS: I thought it was the cleanest city I had ever seen anywhere.

BROOKS: And anyway, our—the cousin that I stayed with, the ones that April had gotten most friendly with was—she was a little younger than I am—but they took us around to visit other family members. And they took us in Knokke. There was a square called the Canadian Square that was all Belgian and Canadian Flags all around. And I said, "Well, how come this is Canadian?" And they said, "Well, in World War II the Canadians liberated this part of Belgium." I didn't know that. And then they also showed us where the last Canadian

soldier had been killed. You know, the little memorial that was there marking the site.

LEVINE: And was your house still there? Did you—did you have a chance to—

BROOKS: Well, we—we went all over but to find the exact spot of things is pretty hard to do. We went to the church where my mother and father were married. But that also—they—it was a new church, you know, next to it. The old building was still standing but we couldn't go in it.

LEVINE: And what do you feel most satisfied about when you look back on your life?

BROOKS: Well, I don't know. That's a hard question. I guess having your family, your children and your family. Now, my sister and I, we've lost a brother and sister. So now we have—I have my sister and I have my brother that was the youngest born. But our ties with Belgium are increasing, really, because my—my sister's children have been over several times and—

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. And how do you feel about this time in your life when your children are grown and [unclear]?

BROOKS: Well, I think becoming over 80 is a little scary because you don't know what's ahead of you. Did your mother—

MR. BROOKS: Sure you do. [laughter]

BROOKS: Did your mother feel that way?

LEVINE: I think so.

BROOKS: Yeah.

MARY: Taxes, huh?

MR. BROOKS: More bridge.

LEVINE: More bridge. [laughter] Uh-huh. And how about—do you—do you have a sense of—you know, a Belgium side of you and a—

BROOKS: Not really, because—

LEVINE: —American?

BROOKS: —as I say, I came here when I was four. I think I was kind of Americanized. I feel this is my country.

MARY: [unclear] think we're proud of our heritage though.

BROOKS: Yeah.

MARY: Very proud. I know my children both are too, you know. Sort of the Belgian side. I don't know why.

BROOKS: Yeah.

MARY: I guess because the American, or the WASP side that were the—like, my—the father of my children was a white, Anglo American Protestant, you know. [chuckles] I always called him a WASP. And that's so mixed up. But the Belgian side is—

BROOKS: Yeah.

MARY: —sort of pure. [laughs] [sentence unclear].

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. Right. Let's see. Is there anything else you can think of having to do with coming here? Maybe—how was it for your visiting Ellis Island?

BROOKS: I didn't feel any pain or anything like that, if that's what you mean.

LEVINE: Well, you didn't have a good experience—

BROOKS: Yeah.

LEVINE: —when you were there.

BROOKS: But I was very happy we went. I—I—as I say, my husband really—he'd been through an awful lot of sickness. He didn't really feel like coping with New York City traffic. And—but he did it because he knew I wanted to go. But we went to the Statue of Liberty—

MR. BROOKS: [unclear] sacrifice.

BROOKS: —and Ellis Island and both enjoyed it very much.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

EI-847/BROOKS

BROOKS: And we enjoyed seeing all the pictures around and the pictures of the boats, you know, that people had come on and—

LEVINE: Okay, is there anything else you can—

BROOKS: No.

LEVINE: —think of that maybe we haven't—haven't touched?

BROOKS: I can't think of anything.

LEVINE: And are you Marie?

BROOKS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Her sister?

MARY: Yeah.

BROOKS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay. Well, I think—

MR. BROOKS: [unclear]

LEVINE: —we covered it. And I want to thank you very much.

BROOKS: Well—

LEVINE: And now your voice and your story'll be part of the Ellis Island Museum Collection.

MARY: Isn't that wonderful?

BROOKS: Yeah.

LEVINE: And I'll send you a copy of the tape.

BROOKS: All right. Thank you.

LEVINE: Okay. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]