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**NICHOLAS MEZEY**

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**PORT:**

**RESIDENCES:**

LEVINE: Okay, today is February 18, 1997. I'm here in Hope Sound, Florida with Nicholas Mezey who came from Hungary in 1951 at the age of 28. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And if we could start at the beginning, if you would just say your name and your birth date and where in Hungary you were born.

MEZEY: Yeah, well, my name is Nicholas Mezem, or rather, Mezey, born in Csurgo, Hungary, which is on the southwest corner of Hungary, close to Croatia or very close to the area where today the American troops are being prepared to go to Bosnia, et cetera.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Ah, could—could you spell the name of the—is it a town [unclear]?

MEZEY: It's a small village spelled C-S-U-R-G-O.

LEVINE: Okay. And pronounced?

MEZEY: Churgo.

LEVINE: Csurgo. Did you live in Csurgo until you—

MEZEY: Until I was about five years old and my father was a teacher. And then this was pretty close to the Great Depression era. Then he lost his teacher job but he got a government job to work for the Internal Revenue Service of Hungary. And he was removed to another part of Hungary called Cegled, which is in the mid part of Hungary. That's where I started going to elementary school and gymnasium—high school.

LEVINE: Okay. And could you please spell the name of that—

MEZEY: That town Cegled is C-E-G-L-E-D.

LEVINE: Okay. And then did you remain there?

MEZEY: Remained there for about 10 years and then my father was again transferred to another town nearby called Natkurish [PH] where I finished my high school in 1941. Yeah, 1941. Now, at 1941 I was already 18 years old and I was supposed to go to the military. But I was going to law school. I have permission not to report to the military. And I attended the law school in Budapest from 1941 through 1944. And in April or May of 1944 when the Russians were already pretty close, or perhaps even in Hungary, all the deferments, military deferments were canceled and the school year was finished somewhat earlier. Rather than the usual June finishing time, it finished around May or end of April. And I was supposed to report to military duty but I didn't have any intentions of going into the military and fighting for or against anybody. And I just simply became AWOL, as they say. You know, I didn't report. And by that time a lot of people, Hungarians, as the Russians advanced—they were kind of advancing toward west—western Hungary, Austria, et cetera. So I did the same and I wound up in Austria when the war ended as a student civilian refugee.

LEVINE: Now, did you—you were traveling by yourself? I mean, how did—how did—

MEZEY: No, actually, there were other students, four of us who had the same idea that they didn't want to go to the military. They were not interested in getting involved in the war, a hopeless situation. And it was at no small risk to all of us because you are a military deserter, for all practical purposes. But four of us, we kept together and many times, just walking and avoiding major cities and avoiding German troops who were trying to, and did, actually collect young men who were planning or trying to go to

the west, to put them into uniforms and sent them back. We were lucky enough not to get into that and wound up in Austria when the war ended.

LEVINE: Okay.

MEZEY: Yeah.

LEVINE: So you—did you have any close calls or did you encounter [unclear]?

MEZEY: Of course, it was a very difficult time. Close counters, yes, occasionally. We almost got killed by some Russian airplanes who mistook us, probably, from soldiers or whatever, or we were completely covered with lice and had nothing to eat, basically. And—and this was a pretty difficult, miserable period in our life. You know, trying to just—just move out of limelight and get into the west. And listening to the radio at the time, of course, the BBC, we knew roughly the outlines of the piece. And there would be various zones in Germany, Russian zone, French zone, English zone, American zone—occupations of zones. We wound up in the British zone, which we didn't know exactly where we would be. But then we worked our way through to the American zone and the Americans—the American soldiers picked us up and put us in a refugee camp in Bavaria in the American zone.

LEVINE: Now, how long did you stay in the—in the refugee camp?

MEZEY: Right. Now, the refugee camps had temporary life, basically, and the purpose was to ultimately repatriate and send all those people back. There were some horrible stories about trainloads of Hungarian men or also women, mainly. They—the trains never even stopped in Hungary, went straight to Siberia or whatever. So we gave up the idea of being repatriated. And four of us, we decided to stay for awhile anyway. I didn't—at the time, nobody—we didn't have the intention of coming to the United States as an immigrant. It was just a temporary situation. And we left the camp and we set up a shop in an American military establishment, a former German [unclear] in Munich. And we set up a—a tailor shop, which we called a tailor shop. What we did was we were ironing the soldiers' jackets, Eisenhower jackets and shirts and pants so they looked good when they go and see the frauleins [PH]. And we got paid by cigarettes and chocolates and we got the food from the mess sergeants. So we lived very well because at the time, you know, money didn't mean anything. Money had no value. A pack of cigarettes had tremendous value, or a piece of chocolate or similar things, which we were selling on the black market. And that thing, that good game lasted until the [unclear], which was in 1948 when they introduced a new currency in Germany. The old Reismark [PH] was one day to another, disappeared and everybody got 100 Deutschmark. So then, with money, stability, I

started to work, actually. Now, this was work but it wasn't official work in a sense. It was black market work. I started working. I stayed in that American establishment and I worked in the library. And in the library I— I had a decent job. I got paid, maybe 200 Deutschmark a month and I got Social Security. I even get a pension from that time now. And, you know, I also had the ability to learn German—well, German and English, of course. Now, English—well, back in Hungary in high school we had to have—I had eight years of Latin, six years of German and four years of English. Now, these were school courses. Of course, it didn't really make you perfect in those languages but it gave the foundation in all those languages. So I had a little easier time learning English at the time. So I stayed there for awhile and then—then came the IRO, International Refugee Organization in [unclear] and they set up an establishment for screening refugees. I spoke fairly good English at the time, also German. And I got a clerical job working for IRO, International Refugee Organization, in the American section where I was engaged in screening refugees to the United States. And I worked there for about two and a half, three years. Again, it was a decent job where got a decent pay.

LEVINE: What—what was—what were you scr—how did you screen them?

MEZEY: Okay. Most of the people at the time going through were Jews. And I can't tell you how many but tens of thousands. And the system of immigration to the United States at that time was based on screening people outside the United States. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century they were screened at Ellis Island, I believe. People came and when they arrived [unclear] some cursory screening looked at them or whatever, or checked the TB for TB or whatever. But at the time when—after World War II the screening process was actually performed outside the United States. Now, what did it involve? It involved, among other things, establishing the identity of the individual. XYZ came in. I can give you a good example: Herman Schwartz [PH]. And he says, "I don't have any papers. I was in Karset [PH] but my name is Herman Schwartz. I was born here, so and so. My father's name, my mother's name," et cetera. So I took an affidavit from them, for instance, if they had no papers, stating their backgrounds, whoever they are, whatever they are, a sworn statement. And then they had to go through medical examinations. Everybody had to have a TB picture. I mean a long x-ray to see whether there is TB because the Americans at the time were very afraid of spreading TB, and so the health examination. And of course, in most cases, I don't know the subsequent steps. We worked—I worked with the American consulate in Munich. And what they did, how they examined or checked the identity of the people, cross-referencing or not, it—I don't know. But sometimes it took only a month or two for people to get through with the papers. And this friend of mine, Herman Schwartz, I have to briefly tell you that story. There was something wrong with Herman. He was an orthodox Jew and

he got married. He married; he had little kids and Herman was always telling me that, "I know what I will do in the States. I'm going to the garment district." And he talked to me. He was there at least a year and a half. For some reason, his papers were not right. And Herman showed me how—he said, "I can cut shirts or underpants more out of a yard of goods than anybody. And I know how to do that," et cetera, et cetera. And well, for some reason, I don't know what was wrong with his papers or his identity or something—I don't know. His case was delayed long, long, long. And finally, he got the permit and went to the United States. Of course, I also wanted to come to the United States, but I was not eager to go because I really didn't want to emigrate. I wanted to go back to Hungary but the question of the political situation at the time was quite unstable. I don't want to go into that; it's a long story. It's well documented, well known. And sort of, I became an unwilling emigrant as time went by. All of a sudden, I realized time is passing by and I really have to do something. So I also submitted my own request to—to the IRO and to the Americans [unclear] United States.

LEVINE: Now, had you—did you have any contact with your family once you—

MEZEY: Yes, we have been able at the time, you know, to correspond and send letters back and forth. The post was not very fast but my parents—I have a brother in Hungary. He stayed home and, somehow, my father said, you know, "The Hungarians always wind up on the wrong side of two opposing factions." He said, "Why don't you stay for awhile? Your brother is here and one of you may be the lucky one." So based on that kind of a family decision, I stayed and ultimately, of course, things didn't look very good in Hungary politically. The communists slowly took over more and more and there was no hope for any kind of democracy or whatever. Now, this was in the late '40s and so—and since the law under which the immigrants came to the United States was to expire in 1950—so the last ship I came on on the—the last minute, because I boarded the ship in Bremerhaven [PH] in December, 1950—December 22 or so. So that was the last ship. But as I said, I worked there. It was fine. I also considered staying in Germany. I got married in Germany and I had some ideas that I get into some business in Germany. Opportunities were, of course, available in Germany at the time, except it needed capital. And capital was, of course, not available to me. But I was thinking of getting into some business and stay in Germany. But then when the immigration permission came, we decided to come anyway. And I was sponsored by George McGovern's father, who was a Presbyterian minister in Mitchell, South Dakota. And everybody—

LEVINE: How did that happen to be?

MEZEY: Well, everybody had to have what they called an assurance, a contract so we don't become a public burden. And it was before I married through the Church World Service. I was reared as a Protestant. Somehow, a minister in Mitchell, South Dakota was willing to support me and guarantee that I will not become a public burden. And it turned out to be George McGovern's father. We wrote a couple of letters to each other and he wrote to me about George. George is exactly the same age as I am. And he told me that, hopefully, it won't bother me that George was in the Air Force and saw some action over Europe. [unclear] it won't bother me but I probably would be going to their family and they'd take me in as a family member. I can go to college and room with George. I told this to George when he was running president. I met him in [unclear]. He remembered his father was sponsoring somebody. But when I got married I—well, the contract was only for a single person. Now, the fact that I didn't make it to Mitchell, South Dakota is—is—was a great—a good thing for me but I think it was bad for George, because if he had had the chance of rooming with me, I think he would have become president. [laughs] I used to tell that joke, you know, because George is intellectual but I don't think he has common sense much. Not much. Anyway, now, I don't know—hard to continue, basically. I came to the United States with a—well, I had a hundred-dollar bill in my pocket. My wife's family gave me a hundred dollars.

LEVINE: So in other words, your wife couldn't come because she—she had not received [unclear].

MEZEY: No, she did. She did, but the—the assurance that was granted to me by that person was for one individual.

LEVINE: I see.

MEZEY: So when I arrived—then, of course, the Church World Service itself took over responsibility for me, instead of a specific individual like Mr. McGovern. The Church—the Church World Service assumed responsibility. I didn't have to go to Mitchell, South Dakota. I've never been there. Maybe one of these days I will. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Was there anything about the voyage [unclear]?

MEZEY: Oh—oh, yes. Yes, it—it was a rather turbulent passage because it was in December, end of December. And in Atlantic even during that time they have hurricanes or storms of hurricane force. And there were 1,100 refugees on this ship and I was editing the ship's newspaper. So I had access to all the information, et cetera, and the sailors.

LEVINE: How did that come to be?

MEZEY: Well, I was speak—I spoke English and so did my wife. And somebody had to do some of these activities and we volunteered. But the passage was very difficult. The seas were extremely heavy and I would say 95 percent of all the passengers, including the sailors, got seasick, seriously seasick. And we were out to sea in the Atlantic Ocean about a week when we were told to stand by a stricken freighter called Flying Enterprise. And that freighter was carrying some heavy cargo, steel, that shifted in the heavy seas, and now the ship was listing about 35 degrees. Two sailors got killed as they were trying to ride the cargo. And the captain ordered them to abandon ship and we took on the sailors. Our first lifeboat we sent over got crushed so—in January, imagine—everybody was in the water. And the second boat fished them out. By the time I was pulling them up on the side of the ship, they had to climb on rope ladders. So this is how we took the whole crew, except the captain, who tied himself onto his ship with a case of whiskey. And he decided not to leave his ship because, if he would, there were some Russian ships around. They could lay a line on the ship and claim the whole thing. So the Navy ordered our ship to stand by as long as some other help arrives, and four or five days later a tugboat came and they took the ship in tow. And by the time we arrived in New York, of course, this was a—big news, front page of the “New York Times.” And the hero, the captain, Captain Carlson—he stayed on his ship and within sight of Ireland, once the ship made it to Ireland, finally the ship sunk. He was saved and he was a hero, got a big parade in London and some other distinctions. And when they arrived, of course I had my cam—took pictures of this whole thing. All newspaper people are coming, asking for the story. So it was a rather auspicious crossing and difficult. I may add that neither my wife nor I did get seasick. I don’t know why but we just escaped that. And when we arrived in New York on a January, very cold morning, we have to get up at two o’clock. Everybody was on the pier and waiting for a final checkup before you are released. I had a friend of mine waiting for me. They lived in New Jersey so I would go to this friend. And we are waiting, waiting, waiting. No food, no nothing from two o’clock in the morning. It’s now noontime and most everybody is gone except about 75 to a hundred people, including ourselves. We are still there. Didn’t know why, and as we are looking around and walking around, two American ladies approached us and they talked to us, what’s the matter with us, et cetera. And they were very kind. They gave us cookies and cigarettes and hot coffee, which we appreciated very much and started to talk. And by that time, I found out that for some reason we are held back. We were not released. We are going to Ellis Island. But I didn’t know the reason. So this very kind lady talked to me and my wife and, “Don’t worry. Don’t worry, young man. Everything is going to be all right.” And he asked me questions, what I did. I said, “Well, you know, I went to law school in Hungary. I almost finished that in three years.”

“Oh,” she said. “My son is”—was going to law school too. Very interesting to me, you know, but—and then she left. She gave me her card. And, “When you get out,” she says, “call me.” Now, let me just go back and so finally, we are taken to Ellis Island and I don’t know why, whatever, but maybe a hundred of us. So there’s a ship or a boat takes us to Ellis Island. That was a little disappointing and kind of depressing because Ellis Island at the time was a detention camp, more like a prison than anything else. People who, like us, you know, for some reason—at the time I didn’t know why—we were detained. Or even people who were to be shipped out of the country also were there for temporary. Anyway, it was barbed wires, machine-gun towers at the corners, and interestingly, right next to the Statue of Liberty. So I was looking at the two things and I was somewhat—you know, I felt that that’s—I don’t know why the prison has to be right next to the Statue of Liberty. But of course, it was old tradition that Ellis Island was a holding place. So the next day we learned that the reason why we were detained is that my 35-millimeter picture of my lung, the x-ray picture, didn’t come out well. And they want me to—they will take me to the hospital in Brooklyn to make a big x-ray, because [unclear]. So we were there for five days or six days and they took my picture. Everything was fine and then they let us go. But the time we spent there was—was very difficult in a sense. I mean, men, women were kept separately. They slept separately. During the day, we can mingle. If we went from one room to another there were guards inside. They were counting people going this way or that way or whatever. There was library. You could sit down, read, you know, newspapers, et cetera. Otherwise, it was fine, you know. But it was—it was, unfortunately, a prison. And as long as I didn’t know what’s going on, I was quite upset about it. But everything turned out fine and I was released.

LEVINE: Were you—were you escorted to Brooklyn at some point?

MEZEY: Well, they took us in a bus. You know, they—they took us to the hospital someplace in Brooklyn; I don’t know. A bus came. Well, first, of course, we went over, I think, on the ferryboat. And then a bus took us to the hospital and then they took the picture, came back a couple of days in between weekend, you know, and finally say, “Oh, Mr. Mezem, you’re okay. You can go.”

LEVINE: Now, how were you treated, generally?

MEZEY: As I said, we were treated fine. There—there—there was—I mean, the food was good. They—everything was fine in a sense, except the—the outside environment, the machine guns and the barbed wire and the fact that you were kept separately, men and women, during the night. During the day you could be with anybody. Well, anyway, so I got released and

went to this friend of mine who lived in New Jersey, north New Jersey, and I was trying to decide what to do with my life. I had a hundred-dollar bill in my pocket and I didn't know what to do, basically, with—the law studies I had in Hungary were absolutely worthless because everything in the U.S. is based on the English common law, while the law I studied on the French civil code and the old Roman law. So it's totally useless. And—but before I made any decision, it—I remembered that this lady gave me a card. So my wife and I called and said that—talk to somebody. Turned out it was not the lady. We never saw the lady again. It was a secretary and it turned out that this lady was the wife of the chairman of the board of J. Walter Thompson, one of the largest advertising agencies in the world. So we go to Lexington Avenue and we are—we receive—we are received, you know, and they—this secretary is talking to me and my wife and et cetera. And she knew about us. She expected us, et cetera. They offered a job to my wife because she spoke good English and could type and—and shorthand. And then they said, "What do we do with you?" I said, "Well, I don't know what you do with me but"—so she was asking questions and I—asked me a lot of things. What work did I do? I said, "Well, I worked in a bank at one time, you know, during the summertime to make a little money." And she says, "You want to work in a bank?" I said, "Well, of course. I would love to." So they took me to the financial vice president of the company, who was equally friendly and said, "All right, young man. Sit down," and got on the telephone and talked to somebody; I don't know who. And once he got through talking to somebody he said, "Now, you take the Lexington Subway. Go to Wall Street exit right at front of Wall Street. There is a church, a [unclear] church and opposite that there is a big building. And there is a bank in it called Early Trust Company. Go to the 10<sup>th</sup> floor [unclear] or whatever and ask if for Mr. Shaw."

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

MEZEY: And I started working there as a clerk in the foreign department and immediately, as soon as I got the job, I decided to study something but not law. Based on some advice from some people at the time, I decided to study accounting. They said, "We need accountants in this country." So I went to NYU and start—got one term, et cetera and then started seriously for a degree, a B.S. in accounting downtown in Washington Square. So I went every night from 6 to 10, Washington Square, and in two and a half years I got my degree in accounting. And when I got that, then I said, "Well, now I got a degree. Now I want to be a public accountant," and tried very hard. Not that I didn't like the bank. They promoted me; I was doing fine there but I wanted to be in public accounting. And I somehow managed to get a job at Price Waterhouse

and worked at Price Waterhouse for about two and a half years or so when, by chance, I was working on the audit at JP Morgan and the controller of the company asked me, "Nick, would you like to work for us?" And I said, "Of course, I"—how can you refuse JP Morgan? So I got a job at JP Morgan and I did quite well. I got my CPA diploma and I was doing quite well; I was assistant vice president. And I did a lot of the technical things that bankers at the time didn't pay too much attention to; namely, numbers. That's they wanted me because, as an accountant, I understand numbers, balance sheet, financial statements, et cetera, et cetera. So I ran courses, teaching, et cetera, the bankers, you know. And generally speaking, when we hired people—of course, we hired people on different—you know, the best schools, the Ivy League schools. They usually worked with me for awhile, those who were going somewhere. And one day my boss brings somebody over to me and he says, "Nick, meet Samuel Meek [PH], Jr. Sam just joined the bank and he is going to be working with you for a few months and said, "Hello, Sam. Sit down." And I asked him if his mother lives in Greenwich, Connecticut. And his mother was the lady—

LEVINE: Who gave you the card.

MEZEY: So he called his—and [unclear] it off. [tape off/on] So that, in nutshell, how I kind of started my life in the United States and then—

LEVINE: What was your wife's name?

MEZEY: My wife's name, Irmgard—Irmgard—I-R-M-G-A-R-D Sido—S-I-D-O, her maiden name.

LEVINE: And did she stay working—

MEZEY: She—

LEVINE: —at the bank?

MEZEY: No, she didn't want to commute to New York City. We lived out in New Jersey in Newark, downtown Newark, New Jersey where they had the riots later on. Of course, we couldn't afford to be in more expensive place. And she worked out there as a secretary and we both worked. And I must say that one thing I always criticized in the United States that, even today, education doesn't rate too much governmental support. Clinton now has some plans to give at least some tax benefits to people who are trying to acquire a higher degree. Unfortunately, my salary that I earned at the bank didn't even pay for the tuition I paid to NYU. And I couldn't even deduct the tuition for tax purposes. I had absolutely no benefit or help of any kind. Now, I always said that if I had opened a

grocery store on the corner, I mean you get tremendous tax benefits immediately. But since I—I was going to college and it cost me an enormous amount of money—you know how expensive universities are, even at that time. My gross salary didn't pay for the tuition during one year. Of course, I was taking intensive courses and—

LEVINE: How did that compare with Hungary when you were going to law school in—

MEZEY: Well, it—it was not quite free. The university I was going to was not quite free but—but it wasn't a burden, in a sense, for the family to—of course, my father paid tuition. It was not such a burden. You could easily afford, if you qualified academically, to go to university. But I—I just think that this system, hopefully, is now changing. And I don't know whether Clinton will succeed in giving some benefits or some tax help or other help—you know, people who want to study—because I felt that that—that was misplaced. I mean, I have—ever since, I—I work I—I have paid taxes. I paid Social Security. I've never got any kind of unemployment or whatever. I never was a burden but—but the thing is, if I hadn't gone to college, I don't think I would have been in a position. And I am paying lots of taxes to Uncle Sam as a result of my going to college. And I never got any, I mean, help from the government for that. So I—I think they ought to change that a little bit because I—I think that, especially today now, the world has changed. I mean, we are in a highly changing and evolutionary technical society where, I mean, the people now just coming out from even colleges are not capable of being absorbed in a productive way into this new society we have. I mean, they talk a lot about Internet and everything else, the computer age. It's even more important today that education is—is supported in the United States because, as you know, the traditional labor—I mean, today is just shrinking in numbers. And production line workers are disappearing by the hundreds of thousands and education is now the most important thing. But as I said, hopefully, something will be done, you know, along these lines.

LEVINE: How about other differences between life here and—and your life before you became a refugee? But—

MEZEY: Yes. Well, you know, I—I grew up in what I call a middle-class family where the fact that I went to law school, you know, it was a family decision. And of course, not expecting that the war takes such a turn and turmoil, actually. I mean, my life would have been on a planned track. You know, finish your law school, become a lawyer. Get married. My father already decided [chuckles] who I should marry. Of course, that's—that doesn't work. But in any case, I—I mean, it was a kind of a life, you know, where things were to move ahead on a normal course. And it was expected that you perform and society expected you to do things, et

cetera, et cetera. Somewhat different than in the United States. In the United States you have such freedom to be such idiot or whatever you want to be, or nobody's going to press you or pressure you. I mean, the social pressure in that lifestyle was much more significant, you know, because it was expected you do that, expected you to do that, et cetera, et cetera. Here in the United States, of course, the opportunities are wonderful. I don't know if they are as—as great as they used to be when I came. But still, today, I mean, there are tremendous opportunities available here.

LEVINE: How do you think the fact that—of—of immigrating to this country—how do you think it affected you in the way you are or the kind of person—

MEZEY: Well—

LEVINE: —[unclear]. I mean, do the—

MEZEY: Tremendously. Let me put it—tremendously. I was a kind of—as I described to you, that society—you—I lived in a society where certain things were expected. You do this; you do that. And if I needed a new pair of shoes, my parents made the decision. And if I needed another jacket, they took me to the tailor and they made the decision. When I was in the United States here, all of a sudden I didn't have somebody standing behind me and saying, "Now you should do this. Now you should do that." Et cetera, et cetera. All of a sudden I had to grow up—let's put it this way—in a hurry. When I wanted a family and—but we decided not to have children until we have a basis on which, you know, I can send them—educate them, send them to school, et cetera. But I always—we always planned on having a family. So for the first five years we didn't have a family. But then you had to be on your own. There was nobody behind you. And this was such a contrast, of course, as the way I lived at home, you know. I didn't make decisions. My parents made the decisions and I didn't have to worry about it. Everything was available what you needed, okay. But coming to the United States, of course, you're on your own. You have to do it yourself and if you don't do it, oh, nobody will bail you out. So, as I said, [chuckles] I have to grow up quickly. And that was good—to the good in a sense because I was motivated. I—I had to produce. I had an approach to it that whatever I do, whatever job—doesn't make any difference—when I was a clerk in [unclear] Company or later on doing much more complex financial transactions, mergers, acquisitions or whatever, my goal was, "Whatever I do, I want to do it better than anybody else." Now, even if I was cutting my neighbor's lawn for a dollar, which I did in order to have an extra buck, I—I made sure that that job is perfectly well done. Whatever.

LEVINE: How did you—why do you think you had that idea?

MEZEY: Because there was no other way to do it. See, I—it never even occurred to me that somebody will assist me or help me or—anybody. Nobody. There was nobody who could or would help me. I—I had to—I had to produce. I had to do it on my own and there was just no two ways about it. Now—

LEVINE: Is—is that to say that you didn't have that attitude before?

MEZEY: No, I—I grew up like somebody very carefree who did—who doesn't have to be concerned about these things. You know, all of a sudden even in Germany it—it developed that I had to make a decision to buy a coat because I didn't have a coat. Now, oh, my parents are not here so I have to make that decision. And of course, now I came to the United States. There was just no two ways about it. I mean, I had to make decisions and I had a plan, just like my friend, Herman Schwartz. I mentioned you Herman. Would you believe it? One day, I'm on the Lexington Avenue subway going north and at 14<sup>th</sup> Street, you know, at rush hour the door opens and people come in, 14<sup>th</sup> Street. And I'm going uptown with my banker friends. Okay? You know. Hat and, you know, the ties and the attaché cases, et cetera. And in comes in a black coat, a black hat with a [unclear], a Jew, under his arm some boxes. And he sees me and jumps at me and [unclear] me. That was Herman Schwartz. And you can imagine my—my colleagues kind of looked at me. I said, "Don't worry about it. I'll explain everything." So I left then. [laughs] I got off at Grand Central Station with Herman and spent half an hour with him, you know. He exactly did what he said he will. He was carrying the shirts or whatever. I mean, fate is such—such an incredible thing, you know. I mean, the other story I told you about this lady and her son. You know. And what coincidence in this world. And the other one is, you know, Herman, who was telling me all the—for a year or so what he's planning to do. And finally I see him, you know, on the Lexington Avenue subway. [chuckles] Well, I must say that I am very lucky, first of all. I am very lucky that I had a chance to come to the United States. I'm lucky I had opportunities. I had some breaks in my life. That break, for instance—I met this lady, Mrs. Meek, and the break I got through her that I could start working in a bank. And then I go to school instead of having some manual work or whatever to do, but I still would have went to school. But I got some breaks along the way. And the fact that I—I got into Price Waterhouse. That was also a story. Or the Morgan Bank—JP Morgan and I was there for 12 years. And I—I had a fairly significant position. Then I left and I just wanted to do what people generally do. They say that Wall Street is paved with gold and I wanted to see if there is any left. [chuckles] Not much left. But anyway, I tried my hand and I—I'm not complaining. I—I was lucky. I worked for Goldman Sachs. The guy who is now the big guy, Bob Rubin, [PH] was my colleague. Bob Rubin, you

know, is Clinton's top man. Bob was a hat trader at Goldman Sachs. So I had my share of good luck, association with people. I had marvelous friends in the United States, Americans, you know, who helped me sometimes with ideas or advice. Not with money; I never got any money from anybody. But—

LEVINE: What do you feel most satisfied about or proudest of?

MEZEY: Well, I—I can say that—well, I did a few good things, I mean, in my life. I'm retired now. I have two kids. They are doing fine.

LEVINE: And what are their names?

MEZEY: My daughter, Helma [PH]. She is in New York. She is now very active in designing jewelry and she's doing quite well. And I have a son, Peter. He is—he's in the computer business and software writing and he's in Seattle doing very well, you know, and financially [unclear]. So it worked out fine.

LEVINE: And the satisfactions, the sort of high points that you feel—

MEZEY: Well, in my professional work, you know, there were some highlights, which I didn't want to bore you with it. But I—I—I had some recognition in my financial work from people, from higher ups and so I feel that I—I—I did some—some things. You know, I—I'm satisfied with what I did. And when I think back of it, you know, basically I didn't have the background normally. You know, I used to interview and hire people at the Morgan Bank. And of course, basically, they came from Ivy League backgrounds, et cetera. I didn't have the Ivy League background and I had an accent. And I never forget it. The chairman of the bank and I—for a whole year we worked together on a—on a big acquisition in—in—in New York State. And the Upstate New York banks—the Morgan Bank wanted to acquire some 10 or how many banks. And I—I worked on this deal for about, oh, a year or so. And of course, it's a question of its legal work, its—its economic justifications, right, economic briefs, legal part of it. Actually, my legal training did come very handy and also, otherwise, you know—and I never forget it that in a meeting, you know, with all of these Wall Street lawyers I never heard about Niagara Falls. And at the time, so I pronounced it Neeagara. And everybody just almost fell off their chair laughing about it. I said, "So what's wrong?" [laughs] "Isn't that the way?" "Not exactly." But I must say that the fact that I had an accent didn't—wasn't a handicap in my life. And if—if I had dinner with the chairman of Exxon or whoever, you know, nobody ever took exception to the fact that I—I speak with an accent.

LEVINE: In the—in the circles that you—that you associated with, were there other people with accents? I mean—

MEZEY: No.

LEVINE: —they—it was [unclear].

MEZEY: Yes, there—there was one more. There—one guy. He was quite—quite well known, a Dutch man. He, too, had an accent and so did I—I, of course. But I mean, it was—it was never any problem.

LEVINE: Handicap. It wasn't a handicap.

MEZEY: Handicap. It was not. In fact, some people accused me of—that I cultivated an accent in order to—which I—I assure you, I couldn't do. I mean, you have an accent or you don't. I mean, I—I—I—

LEVINE: But some people try to get rid of it.

MEZEY: Well—

LEVINE: You didn't try to because it wasn't a handicap.

MEZEY: I—I can't—I—I couldn't even try in a sense because I was too old when I came to this country. You know, youngsters, teenagers who came—you know, they lose their accent. But I—I was 28, 29, you know, when I came [unclear]. It's too late.

LEVINE: How do you think of yourself in terms of Hungarian American—I assume you became a citizen [unclear].

MEZEY: Oh, yes. Yes. As soon as five years was up I become a citizen—became a citizen. I—I tell you, America is my country. I criticize the United States policies, politicians, some other things frequently. But if somebody [chuckles] else does it, then I defend it. On the other hand, I must say that I am always somehow a Hungarian.

LEVINE: What does that mean?

MEZEY: Well, it means that—well, I tell you frankly. I don't even speak as well the language. After 50 years or so, it's amazing; you forget it. My English is better than my Hungarian.

LEVINE: Ah.

MEZEY: And—but there are emotional ties. There are memories. You know, you go back in your childhood to your parents, your school friends or whatever. And basically, everybody has to have a root, you know. And it is absolutely essential that you know where you came from, you have a root; you know where you came from. The fact that I am—I am an American—I am in every respect. I never considered leaving the country or going back or whatever. But at the same time I—I don't deny that I grew up in Hungary. I come from a certain background or heritage of—history of that country, or the people or family. And—but it is something that I guess in the United States there are a lot of people—are doing or have been doing. I mean, you don't have to, in a sense, give up completely your roots. Now, it does mean, for instance—I—I hardly ever speak Hungarian because our friends are not—we don't seek out Hungarian friends. Now, this friend of mine who just walked through the door, he and I—we went to the university. He is—he's a physician. He just retired a few years ago. He lives—lives in Cleveland. So we go back, you know, 50-some years and we see once a year each other. They come down at this time because Cleveland is not the nicest place to be, so they come for a week here to visit us. But otherwise, I—we—we are completely Americans.

LEVINE: Was there a time when—when you felt yourself change so that you were an American? I mean, was there some sort of point where you stopped being more Hungarian [chuckles] [unclear]?

MEZEY: Well, I tell you. One point was when—1956. You probably remember—heard about the '56 Hungarian Revolution. That really stirred me tremendously because, at least for awhile, it looked like that the Hungarians will be able to get rid of the Russians and the communists. And at that moment, I mean, I was—I was quite inflamed and I was—I went to the U.N. I know Krushchev came to talk there and I—I was about to kill him, if I could, you know, for what they did. But you know, when it was all over—it didn't last too long, two weeks, three weeks, maybe—all over, no—no change. Nothing is going to happen. At that time in 1956 it's quite possible that I would have gone back to Hungary—if—if the regime would have changed. But when we got through that—and, of course, even worse things happened after—there was no more chance. Turn it off a second. Yeah. [tape off/on]

LEVINE: We're resuming here. We were just discussing the issue of heroes and who they might have been for you, and what about them was heroic?

MEZEY: Well, number one, of course, and it shouldn't come as a surprise, is my father. My father—unfortunately, he passed away at a young age. He got ill in 1956 and he passed away. That's very sad, I think, for me. You know, I hadn't seen him after I left Hungary. A lot of the things I—I got

from him, the determination, the—the—well, in a sense, I mean, all the things that I have done in the United States, to some extent, it was my father—initiative, character and all these things. So that is, of course, many times is not unusual because most people somehow get these imprints from their parents.

LEVINE: Were there ways that your father was with you, or the model that he was for you—that you tried to—to bring about in your own children?

MEZEY: Yes. Of course, this is inevitable. I mean, bringing up children, of course, in the United States is never an easy task and for us especially at the time. My wife also came from, let's say, a traditional family. But she, more quickly than I, kind of adapted to the American ways of education and ideas. And we had lots of arguments about that, generally speaking, the permissiveness. You know, Dr. Spock's books and ideas how to bring up kids, et cetera. I, even today, don't subscribe to it and I try to be a little bit more strict, try to be more even handed, more demanding, et cetera. And today, my children acknowledge that this was not bad, as a result, in the end. But at the time, they didn't appreciate it too much. But since you asked the question, a hero, sort of—I mean, we—talking about somebody who is very important, who has done—impression and influenced my life, well, there is one person I have to mention. His name is Robert Newman [PH]. Bob lives in Connecticut and we were neighbors and, actually, my wife was his secretary. Bob was a—a high executive of General Electric—General Electric. He was in charge of the long-range planning. He's a very intelligent individual. And through that association I—I got—I grew up in a sense, because Bob and I, we often met and we argued, talked about the world, talked about many things, talked about the country, politics, et cetera. And he is such a wonderful person. I tell you. To me, he's like a father in the U.S. And Bob is a fascinating individual. He's—he's now 80 years old or 82, maybe. He has one of the world's largest private collection of ancient coins. He—he learned Greek in order to read poems, histories, everything. He's the most marvelous person in my life. And I—I really—

[END OF INTERVIEW]