

**EI-858**

**ANNETTE RITZER**

**BIRTHDATE: MARCH 10, 1911**

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**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.**

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**RUSSIA, 1921**

**AGE: 10**

**SHIP: THE LAPLAND**

**PORT: ANTWERP**

**RESIDENCES:**

- **RUSSIA: SLUTZ, STARA DOROKI**
- **US: NEW YORK, NY; NORTH MIAMI, FL**

LEVINE: Today is February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997 and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I'm here in North Miami with Annette Ritzer.

RITZER: Can I lock the door?

LEVINE: Oh, sure. Just—we'll pause here for a second. [tape off/on] Resuming here. And Annette Ritzer was born Annette Rockoff. Rockoff?

RITZER: Rockoff.

LEVINE: Rockoff, in Russia and came here in 1921 when she was ten years of age.

RITZER: [unclear]

LEVINE: On the Lapland.

RITZER: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: The ship, the Lapland. At the time of this interview Mrs. Ritzer is eighty-five years of age and we're going to begin at the beginning with Mrs. Ritzer talking about her father, and why don't you state his name and then the circumstances about his coming to America first?

RITZER: My father was Isadore Rockoff. [PH] He was born in Russia. He was the youngest in his family and he had a widowed mother living with him in Russia. He had a married sister and a married brother living in the United States. His brother and his wife both died from the epidemic that was in the United States—

LEVINE: Typhus?

RITZER: About the lungs. Hmm.

LEVINE: Tuberculosis.

RITZER: Tuberculosis, but it wasn't called that I don't think then. Yeah, and they left a little girl who had nobody to take care of her. My father's sister lived in the United States, but she had six children. So they asked my father to come to the United States to take care of the little girl, his niece. He was about seventeen years old or so, and he came and he brought

his widowed mother from Europe with him. He came to Allentown, Pennsylvania.

LEVINE: And where was he coming from in Russia?

RITZER: I imagine they lived in Slutz. That I don't remember, yeah. And when the little girl grew older and she was able to take care of herself—in fact, she got married when she was very young—my father decided he would take a trip back to Europe, and he went to Europe and he met my mother and he got married. And when he got married, he brought his widowed mother back to Russia.

LEVINE: Oh.

RITZER: And they lived in Slutz.

LEVINE: Is that S-L-U-T-Z?

RITZER: Slutz.

LEVINE: Do you want to—

RITZER: S-L-U-T-Z, I guess. That's what it sounds like. I don't remember.

LEVINE: Okay.

RITZER: And there he lived for a few years, my mother and I—and me and a younger sister.

LEVINE: And your birth date?

RITZER: Is March 10<sup>th</sup>, '11—1911.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RITZER: And my sister was two years younger. And after a few years, my father decided there's nothing like the United States, and he wanted to go back again. And he told my mother—we had a store—to sell the store and the house that we had, and he would send the necessary papers in order to come to the United States. My father—after my father was in the United States, the war broke out, and we were there alone for eight years, until it ended.

LEVINE: And what—did your mother keep tending the store or—

RITZER: No, she sold it and she sold the house and she had her mother-in-law, you know, my grandmother with her. And then they moved away to—to smaller towns, you know, where my other grandparents lived, probably, and by that time my grandmother had passed away. There was that epidemic about the flu there years back, and my mother and my sister and I lived with her—with grandparents for a while and then we went—we got a little older, we went to a bigger town, and it was called Stara Doroky [PH], I remember, and I went to school there. And then after eight years, the war ended and—

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

RITZER: Isadore Rockoff.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

RITZER: Sarah.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

RITZER: Sarah Feiermark, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RITZER: And after the war, my father sent my mother money and the necessary papers to come to the United States.

LEVINE: Now, how did your mother get along financially with the two daughters, when your father was away?

RITZER: I don't know, but my mother was a dress maker. She made our own things, you know, dresses and things. So maybe that helped, and then my mother had her mother and father living in another town, you know. So—so they might have helped, but I think my mother was a capable woman. She was able to take care.

LEVINE: What was the store that your father had before—

RITZER: A grocery store, probably. I don't know what kind, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

RITZER: And then when she got the necessary papers, we were ready to start out.

LEVINE: Now, before we talk about leaving, do you remember school that you went to in Russia?

RITZER: Yeah, but we didn't have—it wasn't a big school. We didn't live in a big town in Russia, you know. We just lived in small towns, so the schools were small schools, you know.

LEVINE: With—with different classes altogether, do you remember that?

RITZER: No, that I really don't remember. No.

JL; How about religion? Was the family a religious family in Russia?

RITZER: Oh, yeah. They were very religious. I remember bad times there.

LEVINE: What kind of bad times?

RITZER: I remember my grandparents lived in a small town and—near a highway. I remember that. I was much younger, and I remember the Cossacks.

LEVINE: Oh, tell about everything you can remember about the Cossacks.

RITZER: Riding on the big horses and the big uniforms and hats, riding by and if they saw a Jew with a big beard and all, they'd attack them, you know, and—you know. And young girls would hide in the woods and, you know, from him—from them. That I remember, the small towns like that. But then we moved to a little bigger town, I remember. So that's the way it was.

LEVINE: Do you remember any kind of ceremonies around birth or death or marriage or anything like that—

RITZER: No.

LEVINE: In Russia?

RITZER: No, no. That I don't remember anything. No, no.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Were times hard for you when your father was away? I mean—

RITZER: No, I don't think so because I guess we didn't know anybody who was any different. Everybody was the same.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RITZER: It's like in the United States when, you know, people live—if they're poor, everybody else is poor. They don't know the difference, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and so your mother made your clothing?

RITZER: Oh, yeah. My mother sewed, yeah. And—

LEVINE: Do you remember anything like—like how you got your shoes or if people—I mean, were there little shops in your town and—or did—were there people who traveled through and made shoes or—

RITZER: No.

LEVINE: [not understood]

RITZER: [interposed] I do—I remember little incidents. I had cousins in the town and they took me to buy ice cream in a park one time. I remember little things like that, but I don't remember other things, you know.

LEVINE: Do you remember any experiences with your grandparents?

RITZER: No, I just remember what my grandfather looked like. He had—he was a man with a big beard and I had a little bit of a grandmother. And that I remember, but in those years, I was very young, so, I remember.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RITZER: See, my sister doesn't remember anything.

LEVINE: Oh.

RITZER: Anything.

LEVINE: And how about your mother, what kind of a person was she? What kinds of attitudes can you remember her trying to teach you?

RITZER: No. No, she was just—uh-hmm, nice. I don't know. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] How about foods? Do you remember what you ate? [phone rings] We're going to pause here. [tape off/on] Resuming here. As far as food that you ate as a little girl in Russia, do you have any recollection about the kind of food?

RITZER: That's why I remember the ice cream, because that was a novelty. I don't remember anything else. I guess food was ordinary, I don't know. . I remember eating black bread. That's what we had. We didn't have like rye bread. We had—it was even darker than pumpernick, you know. It was that kind of bread.

LEVINE: And did your mother bake the bed [unclear]?

RITZER: Oh, yeah, my mother did everything. Yeah. My mother was like that. Yeah, people in those days were very handy. They did everything, yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember any of the places where you lived? What—what the house was like? What were the living conditions were like?

RITZER: No, I might have been three years old at that time, because things went on. I remember my father left, we were in a bigger house because we lived in a town. See. Later on we lived in a—a—what they call a *shtetl*, and then when we went to visit my grandmother, I remember that was called a *dorf*. That was even smaller, see. That's when the—I remember the highway.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RITZER: See, so all those—that I remember. That I can picture, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RITZER: But I don't remember other things.

LEVINE: In—in the *dorf* or in the—or in the *shtetl*, was—was it like a—apartment living or was it separate houses or do you remember that part?

RITZER: No, no, it was separate houses. Separate. I know my grandparents in the *dorf* had a house, but you know, it's like one—one level, you know. But then next to it I remember cousins had a bigger house. They were wealthier, I guess, and they had a house with steps.

LEVINE: Oh.

RITZER: You see, where it went up to another landing, I guess. Yeah, I can picture a house. I had cousins there, and you know, you remember little things. You don't remember big things. They're just little things stand out in your mind.

LEVINE: Do you remember like as a child, playing with other children?

RITZER: No.

LEVINE: No.

RITZER: No, I don't know why I don't remember that.

LEVINE: Did you have like tasks to do around the house or anything like that, do you remember?

RITZER: No. I guess I did whatever I had to, but I don't remember. That's—that's just every day things you don't remember. I think you remember—

LEVINE: Unusual incidents.

RITZER: Unusual things, right.

LEVINE: How about—let's see, your mother and grandmother. Did—I mean was there any music or dancing or singing or any kinds of things like that that you recall?

RITZER: No, that I don't remember.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RITZER: I remember when my grandmother died. The one, my father's mother, the one that lived with us. That I remember, during an epidemic.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else—

RITZER: When the flu was. I don't remember what it was called. It was all over the world and she was very sick and I remember when she died. That I remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember medical care at all? Like what people did when they became sick?

RITZER: I imagine there were doctors.

LEVINE: There were?

RITZER: I imagine so, yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. So finally your father sent the necessary—the war was over.

RITZER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Your father sent the necessary—

RITZER: Yeah, the money and the papers and we were ready to go. And I remember we went in a covered wagon during the night because we had to go from Russia to Poland. It was—what was it called? In Jewish it was called the *Grenetz* (border) [. It's—what was the level there? I can't remember. [long pause] I don't remember what it's called. You go from

one country to another. You were—oh, isn't that funny. You were—you were—I can't think of it.

LEVINE: Do you remember why you were going to Poland? Why you couldn't—

RITZER: Because we had to go that way in order to get our visa, I think.

LEVINE: So maybe you came under a Polish visa? Is that possible?

RITZER: Well, I—now, I don't know how it was because I didn't understand things.

LEVINE: You were young, right. Uh-huh.

RITZER: But I—I just know that when we were—we went during the night from one country to the other, and—

LEVINE: Do you remember that—that ride on the—in the—

RITZER: Oh, I remember that, yeah.

LEVINE: Can you tell as much as detail as—

RITZER: No, except as children we were scared. It was night time and we were all covered up so they shouldn't catch us, and then we came to Poland, and we came to Warsaw I remember, and I disliked that place so much.

LEVINE: Tell me why, and what—what about it?

RITZER: Because I had never seen Jews like that in my life.

LEVINE: Like how?

RITZER: They were the kind of Jews who wore the big black hats and the long coats, and the *payas* (long sideburns) in the ringlets, you know, and I as a child in Russia, we didn't have that kind of Jews. And our Jews were dressed like ordinary people. By me, they weren't people. As a child, I was afraid of them, and Warsaw was a very big city and I had never been to a city like that, and seeing those people scared me. And I remember my mother sent me away to another town with some people she knew and I went to school there for nine months.

LEVINE: Oh.

RITZER: So I wouldn't have to be in Warsaw because I didn't like it.

LEVINE: I see. How did the school there compare with the school before that? Did you have any—

RITZER: No, I don't remember. I just remember about the alphabet, I think, because when I came here, when I saw signs in the street I was able to read it.

LEVINE: Oh.

RITZER: So there must—so the sign was—must have been comparable to the United States signs, you know, letters. Even though it didn't make sense to me, but I must have recognized them.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RITZER: Well, after we were there, I don't remember how many months. About ten months or nine months, my mother got a visa to come to the United States.

LEVINE: Were you—

RITZER: That's where we were waiting. In Warsaw we were waiting for the visa to come.

LEVINE: Were you staying with family members in Warsaw, do you—

RITZER: No, I guess with strangers, yeah. And from there we went to Belgium to get the—the big ship, and the ship we got was the Lapland.

LEVINE: And when you got to, I guess Antwerp—

RITZER: Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Well, before you left Belgium when you were in Antwerp, did you stay there very long?

RITZER: No, I don't think so. That I don't remember. In Antwerp I don't remember.

LEVINE: Okay, and how about the passage? Do you remember anything aboard the Lapland?

RITZER: Yes, I remember being very sick and my mother and sister were sick and I remember eating a lot of oranges, and we were, you know, in the bottom where you get sick.

LEVINE: Steerage, uh-huh.

RITZER: In the—what do you call that?

LEVINE: Steerage.

RITZER: Steerage, yeah. And when I came here, I couldn't look at an orange for years and years. I—I couldn't peel an orange. I couldn't feel the feel of it. And—

LEVINE: Had you had oranges before in Poland or Russia?

RITZER: No, I don't think we had it in Russia. I don't think it was one of the fruits we had. I had—that I can't remember, but I remember having a lot of it on the ship and—and I couldn't look at it after.

LEVINE: How about the accommodations and the conditions in steerage, do you remember that?

RITZER: [not understood] . Oh, yeah. When we got to Ellis Island, we couldn't get off the boat because they had, instead of pillows and mattresses, there must have been some kind of straw mattress because they didn't let my sister and me get off the ship. We had something on our shoulders that—

LEVINE: A rash.

RITZER: Got irritated from the straw we were lying on. So we --- they didn't allow us to get off the ship. So we had to stay till the next day. Then I remember this. My father and my uncle came to the ship to see us. It was Sukos (harvest holiday) and they must have come on a little boat. I

remember a little boat, and they hoisted up *teyglakh* (pastry), yeah, and you know, a cake and things like that. And the next day we were able to get off because that got better, yeah.

LEVINE: How was it for you seeing your father then?

RITZER: Exciting, I guess. I didn't—I don't know if I remembered him. That I can't remember. And it was nice.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and so when you were allowed off—so you—do you remember Ellis Island at all? Do you remember the—the big hall and anything like that?

RITZER: [interposed] No, I remember a lot of people. A lot of people, you know. But the only time I was afraid was when I was in Warsaw. That I hated that place. When people talk about Poland, I don't know what they like about it. [Chuckles]

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay, so when your father and uncle met you and you were allowed to leave, where did you go?

RITZER: We were on the ship. Oh, when we got off the ship, the next day? We went to stay at my aunt's and uncle's house for a couple of days until my father bought an apartment. Years ago you had to buy an apartment with furniture because they were very scarce after the war. Everybody was coming in, and it was hard to rent an apartment, so you had to buy it with furniture.

LEVINE: I see.

RITZER: And then we got our own apartment, you know.

LEVINE: Where—where was your aunt? In the Bronx?

RITZER: Yeah, in the Bronx.

LEVINE: And that—is that where your apartment was, too?

RITZER: Yeah, a few blocks away, I remember. I went to school there. Oh, my father got an apartment—no, my father got an apartment for a little while there, only a month or two and then we—he bought an apartment with the furniture in the Bronx and at this point I started PS-4 near my aunt and then when we went to the Bronx, I went to PS-57. That I remember.

LEVINE: And do you remember some things that struck you as new and different—

RITZER: In the United States?

LEVINE: In America, once you got here? Things you hadn't really seen before?

RITZER: [interposed] No, I just remember liking school and I remember school. I remember the teacher I had and we were—we—all the foreigners came to one class.

LEVINE: Oh.

RITZER: It's not like now. It was called 2-B. I don't know why, and everybody was in the same class, Jewish children, Irish, Italian and as soon as they were able to get a little better, a little smarter, they were skipped from one—so everybody started with that 2-B, and then I remember I was skipped to 5-A or something, you know.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about learning the language and how it was for you?

RITZER: No, it wasn't hard. It wasn't hard. No, no.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RITZER: Well, I guess because my father spoke English, you know, and I had cousins there and all that. So when—and we made friends and, no, it wasn't—

LEVINE: We—do you remember being called “greenhorns” or do you remember anything about people treating you like an immigrant?

RITZER: No. The first apartment we went to, I remember was Southern Boulevard in the Bronx and I had a friend right away. My friend, Hilda, and I'm still friends with her.

LEVINE: Really?

RITZER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Was Hilda also coming from Europe? Did she come--

RITZER: No. No, she lived there.

LEVINE: No, she—

RITZER: She lived there. She lived there and we were friends and I had no problem there, no. Although my husband tells me—he was only three

years old when he came, so he doesn't remember. But when he—he remembers when he got older, when people came from Europe, they used to call them names and make fun of them, you know, the kids, but I never had that trouble. We didn't have that, yet. No.

LEVINE: And how about your mother and father, do you think they had the attitude of to become American or do you think they had more the attitude to hold onto some of the old customs and old ways?

RITZER: No! They didn't hold onto any customs. No! They were religious in a way, you know, not—not extra religious. Not, you know—just Jewish people with kosher food and going to temple, but not like some people you see. What do you call them?

LEVINE: The Orthodox?

RITZER: Them. People who are extra religious. They're—they only eat *glat* (undeviating) kosher food and they—when you go into the pool, the women can't go with the men and things like that. We didn't grow up like that. We were just Jewish people. Our parents went to temple on a holiday and that's it, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.

RITZER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Let's see. Okay, so you stayed in school for how long?

RITZER: Not long. I graduated when I was fourteen because when you're smart, they skip you in those days. You don't go regular like you have to be in 1-A, 1-B, you know. Each one went ahead according to themselves.

That's why we were all in the same class, but everybody wasn't promoted at the same time.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RITZER: So I remember going to 5-A after that. I remember my teacher's name, Miss Semler—to 5-A and I graduated when I was fourteen, like anybody else.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and then what did you do?

RITZER: And then I went to Theodore Roosevelt High School and I graduated when I was eighteen, and I went to City College for one year at night. Then I worked. I was a bookkeeper and that's it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and is that what you studied at—

RITZER: I studied stenography and bookkeeping in high school, but I didn't like stenography, so I—you know, I took the bookkeeping. Yeah.

LEVINE: And what did your father do in—in the United States?

RITZER: My father had a small factory making children's hats. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and was your mother at home with the children or did she work [unclear]—

RITZER: [interposed] Well, my mother had a child after. My mother had—I have a brother, and she worked with my father and my mother worked for my father quite a long time because they sent my brother to college after that. And those days weren't so easy to, you know, make do, so you

know, people think you only had to have two families working nowadays, but in those days you had two families working, too. You know, it was no different. It really wasn't different.

LEVINE: Now, did your—did your father employ—how many people did he employ?

RITZER: No, he had a small factory. Just a couple maybe, and my mother used to go there, too. Yeah, she helped out. They had children's hats and my mother used to trim them, you know, I guess by hand. I don't know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. How about the Depression? Do you have any memories of that?

RITZER: Oh, yes, I remember. I remember I worked in Manhattan, all the way downtown and of course I remember. I remember the men standing with the little jacket over them—they didn't wear coats—selling apples. You heard about that, didn't you? On carts, selling apples. That I remember. Of course, I won't forget that. I remember those days, but thank God we didn't have to go through those, no.

LEVINE: So your father—

RITZER: I was working, too, yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh, and your father had the factory during the Depression and—

RITZER: Yeah, my father had a small factory, you know, that kept us going. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And do you remember when—well, how—was it before World War II when you met your husband?

RITZER: Ah, oh, the—yeah. Yeah, I had two children when the war broke out, yeah, because my husband wasn't drafted. In order not to be drafted, he had to work for the shipyards, for the government I guess in the shipyards. He worked for the shipyards in Brooklyn. I had two children, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. How did you meet your husband?

RITZER: [Laughs] You want to know that, too? That's funny.

LEVINE: [Laughs] It's always interesting.

RITZER: My friend Hilda I was telling you about, had a cousin living in Harlem. That's where the Jews lived a lot in those days, and her—and my husband lived in Harlem with his family. So my friend's friend, Sylvia—cousin Sylvia, moved to the Bronx and I became friends with her through my friend. And then my husband's family had moved from Harlem to the Bronx. They had bought a house in the Bronx, and then he went to see his neighbor, Sylvia. You know, all the kids were friends there, boys and girls, and when he came to see her, I was in the house with my friend Sylvia and that was it. [Chuckles] He took me home and that's it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do—do you remember any social clubs that you or your family belonged to?

RITZER: When I was a with a kid with my husband? Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, any time.

RITZER: Not—not before that, no, but I don't know, when we were sixteen or so or seventeen, yeah. In the Bronx they had social clubs. Westchester Avenue I remember, and my husband and his friends had a club and then we had my friends and the girls used to come there, you know. And they were dancing and we used to go some place every Sunday. We used to go to the mountains for a trip on Sundays. You know, like hiking or something or we'd—we'd go on a boat ride and some Sundays. We always went somewheres on a Sunday, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RITZER: To spend the day.

LEVINE: Now, the people who belonged to this club, were they—

RITZER: Young people. My friends and—

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGIN SIDE B]

RITZER: --things, you know.

LEVINE: In the social club, were they mostly people who had immigrated, or was it all [unclear]?

RITZER: [interposed] No, all American and foreign, I mean.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RITZER: Nobody thought of being a foreigner, no.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RITZER: No.

LEVINE: How about becoming citizens? Did you—did you—

RITZER: I was a citizen on my father's papers.

LEVINE: Do you remember when he became one?

RITZER: When my brother was, oh, maybe three years old.

LEVINE: Do you—was that a big day? I mean, was that an important event that you recall [unclear]?

RITZER: [interposed] Yeah. Well, everybody, you know, was happy. And my sister and I were citizens on his papers, but my mother I don't think was. I don't remember how it was. I don't remember if my mother had to be her own or if she was on his papers, too. I don't know. That I can't remember.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did your mother learn English and get along?

RITZER: Yeah, she spoke, you know. And even when we spoke Yiddish at home, it wasn't Yiddish. It was Yiddish mixed with English. It wasn't like you have foreign people coming nowadays, you know. Not nowadays. After the war they came. They spill—they still speak the—the Jewish they spoke in Poland. See? That's what I hear and I don't like. You don't see them speaking Americanized Yiddish at least. They don't use English words.

LEVINE: And what else do you remember about the war years, the World War II?

RITZER: [Sighs] I don't remember because I guess everything was like that for everybody, so you don't notice things. You don't—it's no difference to you than to anybody else. So you don't notice.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So what was your husband's name? Or what is your--

RITZER: Harry Ritzer.

LEVINE: And your children's' names?

RITZER: One son is Jerry Ritzer and one's Steve Ritzer.

LEVINE: And do—do you think you tried to instill in your children any of the kinds of values that you learned from your parents?

RITZER: [Sighs] My—I have wonderful children. What can I tell you? [Laughs] Because they—they are. They have—one son has a married son and a married daughter, and his daughter has two children and the son has one, and my other son has a married daughter and a married son and one son not married yet. And I have six grandchildren. And--

LEVINE: Uh-huh, what do you feel proud of? What do you feel very—

RITZER: My children. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh, and when you think back about coming here as a ten year old girl and—and starting life—

RITZER: I don't know even if know if I was quite ten. I don't remember.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RITZER: But—

LEVINE: Do you think—

RITZER: I remember being very anxious to learn. That's what I remember, yeah.

LEVINE: Do you think coming here and starting, you know, the family starting a new life in another country, do you think that had an impact on you as a person, in certain ways that you can think of?

RITZER: No, I just remember going to school and then to high school and then working, and—no, I just—you know, you take things for granted. That's the way it is, and you learn and you work, and you—you see. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Is there anything else that you can think of? Did you—I'm not sure if you said something about boarders. Do you remember boarders, when you first came here—

RITZER: [Laughs] Well, I think my aunt had. That's what I was—that you must be thinking. In those days, even though she had a lot of children, I think every place they had, they—they rent out to a person coming from Europe. You see, because they have nowhere to say. In those days, apartments were at a premium and not only that, the people coming from Europe probably had no money. I remember my husband telling me that the foreigners were talking about lunch. Lunch, and he didn't know what it meant. He—he was trying to tell me that the foreign people were saying they were sleeping on the lounge in their—yeah, in the relative's apartment or something. Yeah. And—but that's how the foreigners

stayed. They had relatives or friends and they stayed at somebody's house.

LEVINE: And they had board—did they—I mean they had room? Did they have—they had—well, they were called boarders, so I assume they had—

RITZER: Yeah, you know, you made room, I think. See. We didn't have that.  
[phone rings] Excuse me.

LEVINE: Pausing. [tape off/on]

VOICE: [Richard?]

LEVINE: It's a beautiful picture.

RITZER: Yeah, I thought so. I kept it. My sister passed away about ten years ago, but she also had one.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, it's lovely. Okay, how about your life now? How—how is it now that your children are grown and—

RITZER: Well, now it's wonderful. It was until—my husband passed away almost two years ago. So it was wonderful. Now I'm lonesome. [Chuckles] But I have friends. We've been living in this building for eighteen years and I have friends that I—I hope that I wouldn't have to go live with my children or near my children. First of all, I don't like to go up north. I can't stand the cold anymore. Once you're here for eighteen years, you see, now. Now I have one son who moved to Arizona. So it's warm there, so I will visit there, but I will not stay there. I hope to stay here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Sure. And how about people in your life who had a big influence on you? Is there anybody or—either that you knew or maybe a famous person that influenced you in some way that you could think of?

RITZER: No, I really didn't know famous people. [Chuckles]

LEVINE: No, but I mean—

RITZER: I knew ordinary people.

LEVINE: Just from knowing about them, I should say.

RITZER: No. I just had the teachers. My first teacher is—I remember her in first—her name is Semler. She must have had a lot of influence on us, you know, foreigners, yeah. Because I went through school very quickly. I graduated fourteen like everybody else, and I was—by that time I might have been maybe ten and a half because we moved and I had to go to a different school in the Bronx. And so I didn't go to school very long, but I—I went through it very quickly. So I must had a very good teacher. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and how about your friend, Hilda—how-do—

RITZER: My friend Hilda—

LEVINE: That friendship that has lasted so many years.

RITZER: Yeah. She doesn't live here. She lives up in the Bronx and she still has a husband who was ill at the time, and I talk to her. That's all.

LEVINE: Yeah, it must be wonderful to have a friend for such a long time.

RITZER: Yeah, the only friend I have left. Yeah. And that's it. That's life.

LEVINE: Do you think what keeps you together is the fact that you—that you were young and you have so many experiences that—that you shared?

RITZER: With my friend, you mean?

LEVINE: Yeah.

RITZER: No, we were just—we were living in the same building for so many years. So many—so long we were friends, that you just stay like that, even if you're married. Even if you move away, and you write to each other. You call and that's the way it is. You know, yes, you can talk about your children, your grandchildren, and—

LEVINE: Okay.

RITZER: It's nice to have a friend for so many years, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, now—

RITZER: After all, I was a foreigner and she wasn't. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

RITZER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And you—when I asked you before if you remembered playing as a child in—in—in Russia, and you really didn't.

RITZER: No.

LEVINE: Do you remember when you got to this country, the kinds of things you played or what you did for fun early on when you first got here?

RITZER: No, I wasn't a child anymore. I wasn't so—such a little girl. I was busy going to school. Then I went to Hebrew School, yeah.

LEVINE: Oh.

RITZER: And now—you know, you're not—you're not a child when you come from Europe.

LEVINE: Hmm, why do you think—

RITZER: Not at that age.

LEVINE: Why do think that is?

RITZER: Because you grow up differently. You—you don't—you don't play as a child. Even in Europe, I don't know how I played. That I don't remember. Even in Europe, I went to school. Yeah, and I went to Hebrew School in Europe, too. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RITZER: And then here, I went to school and I went to Hebrew School, also.

LEVINE: So it's like going to school was your job and that's what you did and—

RITZER: Yeah, you just take it for granted and—and, no, I didn't play. There was no playing, even here. No, I had friends. No.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RITZER: You're not a child. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Is it—

RITZER: You're more grown up.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Is there anything that you would say about immigrate—or advice, perhaps, that you would give to somebody coming to this country now that we're having such a wave of—of immigration again, like we did when you came?

RITZER: Well, I see people coming, but they don't act like we do.

LEVINE: How—how do you mean? What—

RITZER: I don't know. I don't know any Jewish people coming, but I do know up north they have a lot of Russian people coming. So I don't know how they are. I know they're hard-working people. That I know, and they—they go to school, too, I know. But here, we don't have the Russian people or the Jewish people coming to this country. We have the Cubans mostly and I don't know. They're not as anxious, I think, as we were to learn.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Is there any—

RITZER: By us, it was very important to learn, and then—they not --are doing it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and is there anything else you can think of about—about the immigration experience? About coming to this country? Anything about your mother and father and how they changed or how you changed over time in this country?

RITZER: I don't think my mother—my mother changed. She grew with the years, like we did. You learn. You get older. You learn. You don't—you don't change. You change for the better. Everybody changes for the better. They don't change any differently. Yeah, I don't think so.

LEVINE: And—and you have not revisited Ellis Island since it opened as a museum [unclear]—

RITZER: No. I remember going to Ellis Island when—I think when we were in high school.

LEVINE: Huh.

RITZER: Did they have Ellis Island then? I graduated when I was—1929, I know. When does—

LEVINE: Yeah, they did. Uh-hmm.

RITZER: Yeah, all right. I remember walking up the steps. Does it have a lot of steps?

LEVINE: Well, there's a canopy as you go into it, but there are steps inside.

RITZER: That you have to walk up a lot?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RITZER: Well, I remember that. I remember—it must have been when I was in high school that I went to Ellis Island, yeah.

LEVINE: And did it—did it strike you in any particular way back then?

RITZER: No, I—I just went like all the other kids in high school. No different. I didn't feel myself any different. I was like all the other kids, yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, if—I think maybe we've covered it.

RITZER: [Laughs]

LEVINE: And I want to thank you very much.

RITZER: You're welcome.

LEVINE: I'm very happy to have gotten your story for our Ellis Island Collection. I've been speaking with Annette Ritzer, who came from Russia in 1921 at about ten years of age, and at the time of this interview Mrs. Ritzer's eighty-five, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997, and I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]