EI-861
SONIA RICHMAN PODELL
BIRTHDATE: APRIL 20, 1913
INTERVIEW DATE: FEBRUARY 25, 1997
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 83
RUNNING TIME: 1:03:43
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
RECORDING ENGINEER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
INTERVIEW LOCATION: HOLLYWOOD, FLORIDA
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

POLAND, 1923
AGE: 9 OR 10

SHIP: THE GEORGE WASHINGTON
PORT:
RESIDENCES:

- **POLAND: MALTZ;**

LEVINE: Today is February 25th, 1997, and I'm here in Hollywood, Florida, with Sonla Podell, who came from Poland in 1923 when she was nine or ten years of age. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. If you would start at the beginning by saying your birth date and where in Poland you were born.

PODELL: Okay, I was born in a shtetl, a small town called Maltch, M-A-L-T-C-H, or maybe M-A-L-T-Z. My father was a cantor in that town, and a—a marriage performer and a *moyel*.(circumcizer) He had a *smikha*, which is a Rabbinical diploma, but never acted as a Rabbi. He taught himself to read and write music in Europe and was a very accomplished cantor, who when he came to America taught other

cantors, who had good voices but couldn't read or write music. He taught them how to read or write music. So I would really call him a Hebrew musicologist.

LEVINE: Hmm. And your birth date?

PODELL: Ah, well, I don't know whether it's—I took the date of April 20th when I came to America because I really had no record, and why my parents didn't tell me the date, I don't know. But is it okay to use Hebrew expressions in this interview?

LEVINE: It's fine, and then if you could translate.

PODELL: Oh. I was born, according my mother."*di tsveytn tug khalameyd Pesakh* That means the second day of the holiday of Passover. When I came to America, that particular holiday fell out on April the 20th and that's the date I assumed. I don't know if that's my correct date or not, and I don't know whether it should be 1912 or 1913.

LEVINE: Okay, so that's why we said nine or ten.

PODELL: Yeah, right.

LEVINE: Okay.

PODELL: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

PODELL: Was Solomon.

LEVINE: And it was Reichman in—in—

PODELL: Europe.

LEVINE: In Europe.

PODELL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and your mother's name?

PODELL: My mother's name was Bella.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

PODELL: Her maiden name in Europe was Israelevitch, which became Israel in America. Israelevitch.

LEVINE: Okay, and how do you spell Levitch?

PODELL: It's what they spell—like Israel. Israel, E-V-I-T-C-H, Israelevitch, which became Israel in America. Might I—might I—since you said anecdotes were acceptable. I was taking some courses here at FIU and we were talking about the derivation of names and I asked my professor could he explain how someone who didn't have any money could come up with the name of Reichman or Richman. We never had that much money. And he said, "Whoever gave you that name must have had a sense of humor."

LEVINE: [Chuckles] Well, now, your mother came under her maiden name? She didn't—

PODELL: No, no.

LEVINE: No.

PODELL: She came as—as the wife of Sol Richman.

LEVINE: Okay, now do you remember any of your grandparents in Poland?

PODELL: Yes. Yes.

LEVINE: And what recollections do you have of them?

PODELL: Okay, my—my mother's parents never came to America and I remember her mother and father, my grandparents. My grandfather was a farmer. He owned a farm. How it is that a Jew was able to own a farm in those years is something I am not familiar with. My father's father had come to America before we did in his forties and would not send for his family because he felt that by bringing them to America, they would become *goyim* (non-Jews). They would become irreligious.

LEVINE: But he not? He would—

PODELL: He never brought them over, but he died very, very—at a very early age, and my grandmother, my father's mother, lived in Brownsville in Brooklyn and we came to her home when we came to America. We stayed with her until we obtained our own apartment.

LEVINE: I see, but your grandfather didn't feel that he and his wife would become *goyim*. They felt—

PODELL: Not. Yeah, not—he never sent for his wife. He came here alone.

LEVINE: Oh.

PODELL: And my grandmother came before—a year or two before we did, also through my uncle Morris, who was my father's younger brother, who also brought us to America, as well.

LEVINE: And your Uncle Morris, where was he and what was he doing in America?

PODELL: Well, he—I don't know who brought him here. He lived in the Bronx. As a young man he was in the American army and I think that's when he might have changed his name, and he was the one who prepared the papers to bring us here. The money was—was—I don't want to say donated. The money was furnished by my mother's family. My mother's family had money here in America. They were in the pharmaceutical business. My father's family were the observant, religious Jews. So there was culture there and religion here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and so do you have any recollections of your grandmother or grandparents in—in Poland?

PODELL: In Poland. Um, do you know that I really don't know whether to call certain places where we visited before we came to America. We went to say goodbye to my mother's family, and since after the First World War, towns were either—one day they were Poland; one day they were Russia and one day they were Germany. I really don't remember what was what, but I remember my grandfather, who always wore a derby. I remember him sleeping with a derby. Who

was a very strict, stern disciplinarian and my grandmother I remember as a very sick person.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And what—your father, did he come to this country before your mother?

PODELL: No. We all came—

LEVINE: You all came together.

PODELL: Three of us came together.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, did you attend school at all in Poland?

PODELL: Yes, I did, but not consistently because we kept moving around a lot.

LEVINE: Why was that?

PODELL: Why was that? We were always planning to come to America, and so I think the reason we moved around a lot is because of the First World War. Our home was demolished and as we kept going from one town to another, when you came to a town and you saw an empty house, you moved in.

LEVINE: Really?

PODELL: With your—with your baggage, whatever you carried with you.

LEVINE: And you can remember doing that?

PODELL: I can remember doing that, moving into a town that had an orch—into a house that had an orchard, and a barnyard and I used to climb up on the roof of the barn to eat delicious plums.

LEVINE: [Chuckles] So these towns had been under siege during World War I?

PODELL: Yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: And that's why there were these—

PODELL: Yeah, and we kept moving from one town to another, and my father earned his livelihood by performing in the local synagogue. He would—he would—he was the—if it was a holiday, he would perform as a cantor. If it was any other time of the year, he would either slaughter—he was also a slaughterer, a *shoykhut* (ritual slaughterer), which is the word for kosher slaughtering. Or he would perform a *Brit mila* (circumcision ceremony), which is circumcision, if that was required. As a matter of fact, we had lost our quota for one of the trips to America because in one of the towns a boy was born and had my father left, there would have been nobody to circumcise the child. So we had to wait, I think it's seven days. By the time it was time to perform the circumcision, we lost our papers to board the ship.

LEVINE: So is that by way of saying that for your father, it was more important to perform—that somebody perform this—this ceremony—

PODELL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Than for the family to leave for America.

PODELL: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, and in our travels we crossed what they called in Polish the *grenyetz*. That's the border. We crossed the border from Russia to Poland, at which time my mother was pregnant. The child never survived. That was a sad time in our lives. It's—it's a little mixed in my head. One of the—I had a little sister called Minna or Mincha who died in our moving around from one town to another and I can remember my father digging a grave for her in the forest.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PODELL: We waited in the forest for a soldier to take us across the border and foolishly, my mother gave the soldier something in advance. She had a gold watch that the women used to wear on their lapels. Oh, no, no, no, no, it was on a chain and she gave that to him as security that he would take us across the border. Of course, he never showed up.

LEVINE: Hmm. Do you have any other recollections of World War One?

PODELL: Ah, a vague recollection of my father holding me on his arm while my mother was digging rubble off the house that had fallen that had been either bombed or—or demolished because she had some valuable things stored in the cellar. And that's a very, very vague recollection. I might have been maybe three years old.

LEVINE: And how about how food and do you recall that?

PODELL: Yeah. Yeah, we did not have enough to eat. Yeah. I remember mother telling me a story about her visiting someone in one of the towns, whom we had—whom they had made friends with, and as she

passed the window on eye level, she saw food on the table, but when she got into the house, the table was clean. And she—I remember that she used to go sometimes through garbage cans looking for food. That was after the First World War.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PODELL: And would say to me, when I said I was hungry, she would say, "I hope it's the last time you ever tell me that you're hungry." I thought it was a negative answer, meaning that if we were dead, we would not have to ask for food anymore. But on the other hand, it might have also have meant that we would never need to ask for food anymore.

LEVINE: Now, did you have sisters and brothers at that time, when you came here?

PODELL: Ummm, my mother—my mother also buried a son who died during the war from a mastoid. There were no doctors available and so of course he perished.

LEVINE: Hmm. So you were the only child [unclear].

PODELL: [interposed] So I was the—at the time I was the only child.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PODELL: Yeah, but I do have a sister.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh, and you—you mentioned that the reason for immigrating was religious persecution. Could you say whatever you recall about religious persecution?

PODELL: Well, what I recall is my father was coming home in his underwear from the synagogue, almost naked because some hoodlums had come into the synagogue and stripped them of their clothing. And I remember another time where he had been in another town performing some religious duties and he said he was held up on the way. The wagon was being driven by someone that he evidently hired to take him from one town to another, and they had stolen whatever possessions he had and threatened to cut off his beard. [Laughs] But of course, it was only a threat, but he came home shaken up.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, were there—were there Polish people farming around where you were?

PODELL: I have no recollection of that.

LEVINE: Do you remember the Poles as a—as a group distinct from—from the Jewish population where you were?

PODELL: I do not recall my father and mother having non-Jewish friends.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PODELL: But I do recall that there was a church in town and passing the church always gave me a shiver.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you recall where you lived?

PODELL: We lived in a very lovely house. Now, I don't know. Say, if I was born in '12, the war started in '14, and I remember having a swing in the house, from a doorpost and also mother said I was the only child in town that had a baby carriage. [Laughs] We—we lived nicely just a little before the war.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and so when the war came, there were—there was no—your father wasn't paid for his religious services or—

PODELL: Ah, in some cases he was paid. In our travels when we were moving from one town to another, he would come home with either a—a basket full of potatoes or a bag full of barley. It was like a barter system. I can't recall whether he was ever paid in money or not.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and did your mother work at all in Poland?

PODELL: My mother in Europe, before she married my father was a dressmaker, who made clothes for so-called town royalty. There's such a thing as the town royalty, because everybody had a title. A *pan*. I think a *pan* is like a mister, but I think it's a little bit more elegant and she—she was a dressmaker. The—the cape she's wearing in the picture that I showed you, she made that herself. It was lined with fur. And it—my father met my mother, it was a *shidukh* (brokered marriage) and my mother liked my father immediately and so her father, my grandfather wanted a scholar, so he gave her a scholar.

LEVINE: [Laughs] Now, can you remember what your mother and father were like? I mean, as a young child when you were still in Poland? Are

there any—any experiences that you can recall that kind of give a flavor of—of the ways they were?

PODELL: Ah, what you recall—what I recall is I must have been about six years old at the time. I used to go into town to get soup at the kosher kitchen, which I think Hoover—a Hoover promoted that kosher kitchen in small towns in Europe, where I would go with a can and they would give you a ladle of soup for each child in the family. Now, since I was the only one, I got one ladle, but I'd bring it home and mama would dilute it with water or maybe with milk, which would stretch it to three. And to give you a flavor of my father, he was a very, very serious man who felt there was nothing—life was not—was not a laughing matter. There's nothing to laugh about in life. It was very, very serious. I didn't really learn to laugh until I got married. [Chuckles] Because my husband was a—was a funny guy. And my mother was also an educated woman who spoke about five languages, who had a beautiful handwriting and who had a beautiful lyric soprano voice and I can't remember their doing it in Europe, but in America we used to get together at an aunt's house and my father and mother would sing. Usually this was on a Saturday. We'd get together at an aunt's house and they would sing cantorial or—or—or Second Avenue things or traditional folk songs, but there was always music in the house.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. In Poland, too?

PODELL: In Poland. Yeah, in Poland, too, there was music in the house. Although my father did not play an instrument, but he—he read music and being a cantor—I can remember there was always music in the house.

LEVINE: Do you know why it was decided you would leave at the particular time that you did?

PODELL: I'm afraid not. But when people ask me why, I always feel in my subconscious that it was done for religious reasons. For freedom of expression and freedom of religion, and that there was no future for educated Jews or any kind of Jews in Poland.

LEVINE: Do you recall what your mother and father told you or what you thought about America before you actually came here?

PODELL: Well, what they knew and what I knew is that one lived freely here and that it was easy to make a living and that Jews were not persecuted. And my father came to America, I think outside the quota because a synagogue had requested him to come as their rabbi.

LEVINE: Oh, so he—

PODELL: And he came I think outside the quota.

LEVINE: So these would have been people from your area in Poland who had come to the United States—

PODELL: Who had already established themselves and the papers that my Uncle Morris was able to obtain was that the synagogue requested his presence here and that they—that he would not be a burden to the country. That as a rabbi, he would be able to earn a living and support himself. But when he came to America, he didn't want to be a rabbi because he had this craft of slaughtering, where he could be

more self-sufficient than being a rabbi having to depend on other people to support him.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. How about attitudes that your mother and or father held that they tried to instill in you? Were there any things that you can remember that—that they had in mind, as—as a philosophy for living or how they wanted you to behave or ideas like that?

PODELL: My parents never told me—actually, they never said things like, “You mustn’t do that,” or, “You must do that,” but I believe maybe through their actions I learned what—what is good and what is bad. I was never admonished. I was never told how to behave and I always appreciated that. Even when it came to later in life when I got married kind of late at the age of twenty-eight, they never made me feel that I had to get married. I never heard them say, “When? When? When?”

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PODELL: So they were—although they were European in behavior, they were sophisticated in—in other areas. I really don’t know how to express that better. When my father came to America, he had a long red beard, which became shorter and shorter, as he became more Americanized, and when he passed away, he had only a Van Dyke.

LEVINE: [Chuckles]

PODELL: He felt that one should blend with the surroundings, but not give up—not give up their culture or beliefs or—in other words, not be swallowed up by becoming Americanized and losing your identity. He was a very—felt very strongly about his Judaism, as a result of

which I am very dedicated at this stage of my life and have been for many years in helping make the world a little bit better, and I think my Jewishness is what's doing it for me.

LEVINE: What—that's—could you say, as much as you can, about what your Jewishness means to you?

PODELL: It is the very breath of my body. It is—[phone rings]—oh, may I?

LEVINE: Okay, we'll pause. [tape off/on] Resuming here, after a phone call. You were saying what your Jewishness means to you.

PODELL: Yes. Yeah. Yeah. I always preface it by telling people I'm the kind of a Jew who when I get up in the morning, I say to myself, "Is this going to be a good day or a bad day for the Jews?" [Laughs]

LEVINE: So it's really a part of who you are and—

PODELL: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm very involved in Hadassah. I've been president of Hadassah of this complex for about twelve or thirteen years. I'm a—I'm a *shul* (synagogue) goer. I'm a synagogue goer. Now that I have nothing but time, I go to synagogue every Saturday. Yet, I am not religious.

LEVINE: Is there any—can you say what it is that is Jewishness, apart from the religious aspect?

PODELL: Our history. Our heritage. Our rich culture. What we have contributed to the world. And what—and what Israel means to me. I always say when people talk about dual loyalty, I say, "Israel's my mother and America's my father."

LEVINE: Hmm. Okay. When you were leaving Poland, do you recall what your mother—do you recall the preparations to leave? The packing, the saying goodbyes, the actual goodbye?

PODELL: Ah, yeah. Well, we—we went from one place to another to say goodbye to family. Many of those we said goodbye to have perished in—in the Holocaust. When we crossed the border into Poland, finally, we—we were housed by a Jewish baker, who put us up for a few days until our next stop. Our next stop was a small vessel to Hamburg.

LEVINE: Were—was it simply you, your mother and father traveling together or were there others involved in [unclear]?

PODELL: There were others involved. As a matter of fact, there was a sixteen year old girl, whose family asked my mother to look out for her until she got to America, and she did look out for her and then disappeared and I really never knew—I don't know what ever happened to her. But we went from Poland to Hamburg—was it Hamburg or Bremerhaven? It was either Hamburg or Bremerhaven, I don't remember, where we boarded the ship the George Washington.

LEVINE: And did you stay anywhere along your route before you boarded the George Washington?

PODELL: Well, at the baker's house.

LEVINE: And what was that like?

PODELL: That baker had several daughters. I remember an incident of that town—oh, I came and I needed shoes when I came into town. Evidently, my shoes must have been torn and we didn't have money to buy a pair of shoes. Somebody donated a pair of shoes, but the incident I remember in that town is of a Jewish girl who married a Christian and I remember visiting the home of the parents who were sitting shiva (ritual mourning period) for this daughter of theirs who was marrying a Polish Christian.

LEVINE: Do you remember your—you or your parents' attitude about that?

PODELL: Devastation. Devastation. I mean sitting shiva is—is mourning for the dead. That was just about the worst thing that could happen to any Jewish girl.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PODELL: Yeah.

LEVINE: And you were—were you leaving under a Polish passport, or were you leaving under another country?

PODELL: I'm afraid those details I don't remember, but the fact that we left, we went from Poland to Germany, we must have had permission of the government to do that. Or we must have had papers that allowed us. No, no, no, I have to—I have to retract that. We couldn't have had papers. If we had to steal across the border, then we did this—what's the word? Clandes—

LEVINE: Clandestinely.

PODELL: Clandestinely, yeah. You see, I have—I have a very limited—limited formal education.

LEVINE: Well, I mean you were nine years old, too, so you—

PODELL: Yeah. Yeah. Anyway, so we didn't have proper papers, since we had to steal across and when we got into this town, which was called Nieswiez.

LEVINE: Oh, could you spell that possibly?

PODELL: Well, that's going to be hard. Nieszwiez, N-I-E-S-Z-W-I-E-Z. Nieszwiez. Oh, I lost my trend of thought. You asked—

LEVINE: You went into a town. This was on route. I'm not sure where you were going with that.

PODELL: We spent a few—

LEVINE: The papers. You were talking about you had to sneak over—

PODELL: Oh, yeah. Yes, yes, yes, the people—the Jewish people of Nieswiez obtained papers for us to go to Germany. Now, whether these papers were obtained legally or illegally, I have no way of knowing.

LEVINE: But perhaps because your father was—was a rabbi—

PODELL: Uh-hmm?

LEVINE: Perhaps people were helpful to him in that way.

PODELL: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And he had a place to go to.

PODELL: Yeah, yeah. When we stole—the night before, or two nights before, when we stole across the border, I have recollections of either someone telling us or leading us into a barn, where we fell onto the hay and fell asleep because we, when we crossed the border, there were some periods where we were crawling on our bellies so as not to be seen. And when we got to this town of Nieswiez we were ushered into a—ushered, brought into a barn and—and there are stretches of lack of memory.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. Wow, and were you examined at all before you go to Ellis Island?

PODELL: Yeah. Yeah. When we were about to board the ship, or maybe it was on the ship, we were vaccinated.

LEVINE: Okay, let's—

[END OF SIDE A] [BEGIN SIDE B]

LEVINE: Okay, you were vaccinated.

PODELL: We were vaccinated. My mother did not want a vaccination to take because previous vaccinations had made me very sick, and so she took the linen that we were wrapped in and rubbed the vaccination off, so that it wouldn't fester. And they kerosened our heads and combed it with—with iron combs. Combs made out of metal and evidently either we were—it was a delousing process probably. Now,

I don't know whether we had lice or whether this was just a process that—but I do remember in Europe looking for lice in my—in my nightgown. I remember wearing a linen nightgown and looking in the seams for lice.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and then what about the voyage on the George Washington, do you—

PODELL: Well, I was sick for the entire period. Here was this wonder—this delicious food. We were not steerage. We had a room. The room was as big as my bathroom, but it was an upper and lower bunk and another bunk. Three bunks, and I, when I got up in the morning, all I wanted to do was throw up, no matter whether I ate or I didn't eat. And my father made friends with a *mashgiakh* (checks for and certifies "kosher"), a *mashgiakh* is a supervisor over the dietary laws, who was in the first class. And my father made friends with him and this man invited him to the first class and I remember my father coming down with glazed over eyes from the—from the riches and the luxury that he saw there. But we were—I guess we were second class. I know we weren't in steerage. If we had a room, then we weren't in steerage.

LEVINE: You could have been third class.

PODELL: Third class, that's what it was. It was third class. Yeah, there was first, second and third class and steerage. Yeah, and there were—there were oranges at the breakfast table and eggs and fresh bread, things that we hadn't really seen in a long time.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And how about when the ship came into the New York Harbor?

PODELL: Oh, that—that was very, very exciting. As I said in my notes, my mother, we were out on deck looking at the Statue of Liberty and I can remember her words as though they were said yesterday. She says, “Well, thank God we finally made it.”

LEVINE: Hmm. And do you—you remember seeing the Statue yourself?

PODELL: Yes, yes, yes. I remember, yes, and when we were brought to Ellis Island, my father being a scholar had very poor eyesight. He wore thick lens glasses and so there was that scare of those times about glaucoma and trachoma and all kinds of eye diseases, and when we were standing on line to be checked in—we did have some baggage with us. Oh, I overlooked—I overlooked one very important incident in Poland.

LEVINE: Why don’t you say it now, just so we have it.

PODELL: Hmm?

LEVINE: Why don’t you tell it now, even though it’s out of sequence.

PODELL: We were—in our travels, we were—we stopped at a town called Veronavich. Veronavich, it’s a big Grand Central Station town, where we had to change our luggage—we had to change trains or –we either had to change trains or put our luggage on another train. I can’t remember, and we were told that the train would stop in Veronavich for a half an hour, and my father and mother went to attend to the luggage and left me with our possessions and with our—with our, whatever we had to eat that we took with us. And instead of the train stopping for a half an hour, it only stayed there for

about fifteen or twenty minutes and the train started to move with me on it and my parents not back. There were two Polish officers sitting opposite me, who started to talk to me and called me *Dziewczezydowski.* A *Dziewczezydowski* is a Jewess, a young Jewess, and started to play with my emotions that my parents would not find the train. That they would put a cross around my neck and adopt me as a Polish little girl. And now I really don't know whether it's my imagination playing havoc with me, but it seems to me that they opened the door and were threatening to throw me out, and there was a—a man in clerical attire who motioned to them. And so at the next stop, it was already night time, I was removed from the train with all my luggage. I wouldn't budge without—I don't know how old I might have been. I might have been seven or eight, and there was all—there were already arrangements for me to go back to the town that I came from, and a German officer took me under his wing and was the kindest man I ever met, who asked me if I should have a problem finding my parents, do I have family in Warsaw? Evidently, Veronavich is probably not far. I said "I know I have an aunt and uncle in Warsaw, but I don't know their names and I don't know where they live." And he said, "If worse comes to worse, I would be happy to adopt you," and so we all—[phone rings]. Oh! [tape off/on]

LEVINE: Resuming here.

PODELL: Okay, I'm really not giving you the details in chronological order. Is that going to be a problem?

LEVINE: Well, we'll try to do it as best we can, but it's more important if you think of something that—that it get into—into the tape. So--

PODELL: Okay. Okay. So we came back to the town where we had come from where my parents were waiting for me. I can even remember the coat my mother wore.

LEVINE: What was it?

PODELL: My mother was wearing a tunic coat, black and white check. Black and white checked coat.

LEVINE: Which she had made, do you think?

PODELL: Which she had made, and when this German officer brought me, they were waiting in—in the vagsal. [PH]. A vagsal is a—a station where trains change and they were waiting in that big, big place for me and it was easy to find my mother with her black and white coat, and the German officer brought me over to her with my—with my luggage, with my baggage. In the meantime, while I was gone, people at the station were collecting money from the—from people there to get them a—to get my father and mother passage through a horse and buggy. There was no other train, and so when the money was gathered, my mother took that money and gave it to the German officer for having taken care of me. He would not take it, but my mother just stuffed it into his pocket and when he said goodbye to me, he put it into my pocket.

LEVINE: Oh.

PODELL: He took the money and put it into my pocket, and that was really a very—it's something that stands on my mind as a very, very clear, happy occasion because this German officer was really a *mensch* (human). So anyway, I wanted to tell you this little story.

LEVINE: I'm glad you did, yes.

PODELL: Because I thought it was interesting.

LEVINE: Very interesting.

PODELL: Yeah, yeah. So then we're back to America and--

LEVINE: How about Ellis Island, what do you—

PODELL: Ellis Island. We were sent into a room, after we checked out. Oh, and while we were on line waiting to be checked in, they put a—with chalk a cross on my father's lapel and sent him to another room because of his eyes. Now, people were being sent back, as you know, from Ellis Island, who from one reason or another they were not in good health or had some kind of disease. They were not admitted. We were so conditioned, you know, that when these things happened, you think of the worst. We thought my father would be sent back. As a matter of fact, years later when I went to Europe with my husband—in 1956 we went to Europe and Israel, when my passport—when an officer asked to look at my passport, I would start to shake and quake because the memories flooded back from my youth. And so they examined him and he was okay, and they put us into a room where we had to wait for my uncle to pick us up, and there were beds there. Cots, and my—

LEVINE: Were you detained overnight?

PODELL: No, we did not stay overnight. No, but I guess they had cots maybe for people who wanted to rest, and my mother looked under the

mattress and it was not clean. So we sat on our luggage, rather than on the cots and then my uncle came and we took the subway.

LEVINE: Did you remember this uncle? Was this an uncle that you—

PODELL: Oh, yes, I remembered him. He—he lived on afterwards. Yes, yes.

LEVINE: I mean, did you—when you met him—when he came to Ellis Island to collect you didn't—

PODELL: I had never—I had never seen him before.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PODELL: Yeah, I had never seen him before. And he took us to my grandmother's house in Brownsville, where she had one, two, three, four rooms and three boarders. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Can you describe the house?

PODELL: Oh, sure, it's as vivid as can be. What I remember especially about the house is the bathroom door was open and it smelled so good and so clean. My father was a very, very fastidious person. First of all, we never had a bathroom in the house in Europe. It was always an outhouse and here was a bathroom in the house with the door open. The door wasn't even locked. And so one of the bedrooms was given to my father and mother—and she had two daughters. So it was my father and mother and I, my grandmother, two daughters, sisters of my father, and a cousin who had the room near the bathroom. He was a boarder. Cousin Weinstein.

LEVINE: And your uncle. Did he live there, too?

PODELL: No, no, my uncle had—my uncle had his own family.

LEVINE: OH.

PODELL: My uncle had a wife and—and his own family. And we stayed with my grandmother until we found an apartment on Fafford [ph] Avenue in Brooklyn. 291 Fafford Avenue. You ask me what I did three nights, I don't remember, but I remember 291 Fafford Avenue.

LEVINE: Do you remember that first evening at your grandmother's house, what—what it was like for you?

PODELL: Not really, but I do know she—I had—I had a great love for apples and grandma used to say, "We have to put her into a barrel of apples so she can get her fill of eating all the apples." I loved apples, and my grandmother was a wonderful cook. A marvelous cook. As a matter of fact, if I recall correctly, papa used to tell me that grandma had a restaurant in Europe, and my grandmother wore a—oh, what do you call a wig? A *sheytl* in English? It's not a wig, it's a—oh, it's a feruke [peruke].

LEVINE: Oh.

PODELL: She wore a peruke. A peruke I think is a French name for a wig worn for religious reasons. Yeah. I can't remember first evening, but I can remember my grandmother being a very—a happy person, in contrast to my father, who was not a happy person.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. [crackling noise in background]

PODELL: He said that if people—if people laughed too much, they must have been fools because what is there to laugh about? [Laughs]

LEVINE: How about first impressions, those first few days or weeks in America? Do you—can you recall things that maybe struck you as new and different?

PODELL: Well, my first impressions, when I was taken to New York, and I don't know how many days this was after that, I was disappointed to find—and even in our community—garbage cans on the street. Warsaw was a very, very clean city. You never saw garbage any place. The streets were beautifully clean and I was disappointed that America was not cleaner.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PODELL: Yeah, but my grandmother's house was—was—was spotless and I really don't remember first impressions. I remember working very hard at learning English words, learning the English language and I wanted so very much to be Americanized and to lose an accent. [crackling noise continues] And I think within six months of my being here, I think I spoke as well as I'm speaking now, if I'm speaking well now.

LEVINE: Well, that's wonderful. Now, do you remember school? Going into the school here?

PODELL: Yeah. Yeah. I remember school and I graduated junior high and I had occasion to—I wanted to go into rapid advanced classes so that I would save time on my schooling. You know what a rapid advance

class is? And my teacher in the seventh grade had promised, Miss Campbell—Miss Campbell—that if I maintained good grades for the last three months, that she would put me in the rapid advance class, in the RA one. I did maintain good grades and she didn't keep her promise. So I wanted mother to go to school and talk to the teacher and ask her why she didn't keep her word. Mother at that time didn't speak English. She did learn eventually. She learned to speak, to read and to write. Well, I took it upon myself to go to the principal on my own, and I went to the principal, Miss Griffin, and I told her my tale of woe and the principal said that she would put me into the rapid advance class on a trial basis and if the first two weeks I made it, I would stay on. However, I would have to write a note of apology to my teacher, because when I went in to see her during lunch period to find out why she didn't keep her word, on the way out I slammed the door. So I had to write a note of apology to my teacher. [crackling is continuing and making it difficult to hear]. But I did make the rapid advance class and so I did save two years. I must have been fourteen when I got out of the 9B. I never went to high school.

LEVINE: Why was that?

PODELL: Ah, why was that? I was fourteen. I went to work very early. I really, I've always—I've always held it against my father, who was this great scholar, who didn't give me enough of an education and I think it was only because I was a girl. I went to a business college—can't even call it a—a business school where I took a course, a commercial course and I'd also taken the commercial course in the 9A and the 9B, typing and stenography and that's what I made a living from. I became a bookkeeper and always earned top dollar and why? I did got to night school for some time. I went to Thomas Jefferson in Brooklyn to night school, but I always joke with my friends and I say

that between working and going to night school and running after boys, I didn't have time to study. [Laughs] And—

LEVINE: What would you think your life like—as you—as you became a young woman?

PODELL: Um, well, young, you mean after—well, I started to work very early. I must have been sixteen when I started to work. 'cause I graduated six months in business course and I had a lot of friends, a lot of girlfriends, but they were all my peers. Most of them had graduated high school but none went to college. In those years college was a very, very—how can I describe —it was difficult for the—the majority of people in my circle to be able to afford college. Although the people I associate with now—I associate with now, did go to college the hard way. They worked weekends. They worked during the day and went to college at night, but I—I never went that far.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PODELL: And—

LEVINE: Do—was there a social—were there social clubs? Were there a lot of immigrant—people that immigrated in your neighborhood?

PODELL: Yeah, there were social clubs. As a matter of fact, I met my husband at a social club in Benson Hurst where he was the president of the club, where they used to do good work for the community. Like during Passover they would hand out baskets, and it was also a club for the boys to come and play cards, or maybe to entertain girlfriends and that's where I met him. And he was the last president of the club because then he went into the service.

LEVINE: Do you remember what the club was called?

PODELL: No.

LEVINE: Was it a club for strictly people who had immigrated—

PODELL: No. No, no, my husband was—

LEVINE: Or in the neighborhood?

PODELL: No, my husband was born in—he was born on the East Side.

LEVINE: Oh.

PODELL: Yeah, he used to say when he was with us, he says, “I’m here with a bunch of greenhorns. I’m the only American here.” [Laughs] Yeah.

LEVINE: And your husband’s name?

PODELL: Was Jack.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. How about your father, how did he fare in this country? Did he become a slaughter—slaughterer?

PODELL: He worked very hard. I mean, no wonder he died at sixty-one. He really worked very—he used to travel from Brooklyn to Hoboken, where he did his slaughtering and he would get up three o’clock in the morning to get to the market maybe at five, and he was hoping to be able to retire and devote his time to his music, which was his first love, but he never lived long enough to retire.

LEVINE: Oh.

PODELL: Yeah, but he—

LEVINE: Was he playing music in—in the home or singing? Or—

PODELL: No, what he did when we came, the first couple of years we came to America, my Uncle Morris would engage a theater for the high holidays. They would sell tickets for the high holidays. My father would be the cantor and they—they made a nice couple of dollars that way. I know that there was the Hopkinson Theater in Brownsville, which was the first theater that my uncle engaged, and he would pass out leaflets in the community and sold tickets at the door, and I think they made a nice couple of dollars that way. And during the high holidays, my father always sang at some synagogue as the cantor.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. Do you remember popular music after you—when you started in your teenage years and at that—

PODELL: We had a victrola in the house. We had a piano and a victrola. When I was twelve years old, living in a—we were living in a railroad apartment on Fafford Avenue. I wanted a piano so badly, and my father bought me a piano, which they hoisted up through the back because it wouldn't fit through the doors of the kitchen, and after a year of playing, I grew tired of it. And I was never really pushed through those difficult years, whereas I have a younger sister who is eleven years younger than I, who became an accomplished pianist because my mother would not take no for an answer. But with me, nobody ever told me I had to do something I didn't want to do, which

is not always good for a child. And—my father—oh, you were talking about—oh, yes, I said in another apartment we had a victrola and of course we were brought up on Caruso records and on Galli-Curci records and *khasanish*, cantorial. A lot of cantorial music, but I can remember my father, who was not into popular music, walking around the house and humming, "Summertime," from Gershwin. That must have gotten to him. It must have had a Yiddish feel. He had a little bit of a *krekhtz*, of a little Jewish sigh, and it always amused me that he would be humming a song that to him would have been so alien, because he was only into cantorial music and Jewish music. Stuff like that. Hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and let's see. Well, maybe this is a good point to talk about the—the sheet music that you donated and that is in the Treasures from Home exhibit at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

PODELL: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

LEVINE: How did that come about?

PODELL: Well, I think there was an ad in one of the newspapers where the Ellis Island Museum was looking for memorabilia which had to emanate from Europe. It couldn't be of American origin, and so I answered the ad and told her what I had and they were interested in it. And then I put an ad—they had requested people who, I don't know whether it was person to person or whether this was a request I read in the paper. Where they were looking for anybody who had material to submit. So I put an ad into one of the local Jewish papers, asking people if they had any memorabilia, that Ellis Island was looking for it. If they're interested, call me and I will attend to it. I think I got one call. Yeah, and—now what—

LEVINE: Why don't you describe what it is that is in the museum?

PODELL: In the music?

LEVINE: Yes.

PODELL: Well, it -- it's cantorial music, which my father either composed himself or had gotten from another cantor. I think it was his own composition because he used to sit up nights writing. As a matter of fact, when I—when I was about fifteen or sixteen, I used to sit up nights drawing, and my father said, "If you're going to spend gaslight, we have to find out whether you have talent or not." So he took me to the Educational Alliance on the East Side and I was interviewed. At that time I didn't know that it was Khayam Gross, the very famous sculptor. I didn't know at the time it was he, but in later years when I saw pictures of him with his hair like Ben-Gurion, I realized who he was. Well, he interviewed me and looked at my work and asked me to criticize my work and when my father asked him, "Well, does she have talent?" and he told us that from his experience he found that a—a *veler iz beser vi a kener*. One who wants is—it is better to be one who wants than one who knows how. Because he said he would send children to Paris, very talented children who didn't have the drive and the ambition who never made it, and then he said, "I would send children to Paris who had a great push, a great desire for the art and they became famous." So it was all up to the individual. How great is her desire. Well, of course, I never went any place as an artist. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Did you have great desire at that point?

PODELL: At that time, yes. I used to sit up all night, draw movie stars freehand. I mean not—not copy or anything, you know. [crackling noise again] And I loved doing it, but I think that the fact that I was really never guided enough, because I remember there was a very famous pianist, Joseph Hoffman who said when he was seventeen he wanted to give up piano playing, practicing. His mother would not allow it and he's forever thankful to her for having pushed him through these difficult years when he thought he didn't want to do it anymore and of course he reached world fame. He became world famous as a pianist. Not to compare myself to a Hoffman, but I was never—I was never told "This is what you have to do." So when I made decisions on my own, they weren't always the right decisions.

LEVINE: Why don't you talk now a little bit about the passport, which you also donated and is in Ellis Island?

PODELL: Yes. Yes, yeah. It's a passport, a picture of—the three of us are on the passport, or is it the two of us? My father by himself and I and my mother in another. I think there are two pictures on my passport, my father alone and my mother and I. [crackling again] And I'm wearing a little sailor suit with [unclear] on the—on—on the collar and with pigtails. Rather cute.

LEVINE: Do you think your mother made that?

PODELL: I think so. I don't think that they bought anything in those years or in those days. Yeah, I think she made that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PODELL: And when I went to Ellis Island for the first time, and I saw the passport on the wall, I got very excited and I got so excited, my sister said to me, “You’re making a spectacle of yourself.” I says, “I don’t care. This is a very, very happy occasion,” and a crowd gathered around me and one lady came over and hugged me. Oh, she says, “I’m going to go home and tell my family I met a lady whose passport was on the wall, who came to America such and such a year,” and that was very, very exciting. Then, of course, when I found my father’s music in the Treasure Trove, that, too, was exciting. [crackling again]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PODELL: And my name on all the walls, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and maybe—we—we have just a little time left. If you could say how coming to this country at the age of nine or ten, how that shaped your life, if it did in fact.

PODELL: Well, I’ve always felt I was a product of two cultures, which enriched my life. Ah, I was a little girl, I was very, very, very bright. My aunt to whose home we used to go on the Sabbath to sing and—and to amuse ourselves, used to say to her friends, “This little niece of mine is, say she’s eleven years old with a thirty year old head.” I was very serious. I was a very serious child and I used to practice standing in front of a mirror practicing words, English words so that if they didn’t sound right to my ear, I would try to correct it so it didn’t sound, you know, as though I had an accent. Actually, I’m a little sorry. If I lost my accent, I’m a little sorry because I sound like everybody else. So I—I admire these people who’ve, who’ve come over from Europe with a cultured accent, which I think is charming.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. Is there anything else that you would like to add before we close?

PODELL: After you leave, I'm going to think of a dozen things that I should have told you. As a matter of fact, had I used my head when you called me, I should have written down the things that I wanted to tell you about, but I—

LEVINE: Well, I think this has been a wonderful interview and—

PODELL: Thank you.

LEVINE: There are no apologies—

[END OF INTERVIEW]