

**EI-884**

**VERA BELEHRAD RASK**

**BIRTHDATE: JUNE 22, 1903**

**INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 16, 1997**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 93**

**RUNNING TIME: 58:23**

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

**RECORDING ENGINEER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.**

**TRANSCRIBED BY: TAPESCRIBE**

**INTERVIEW LOCATION: FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG**

**CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1914**

**AGE: 11**

**SHIP: GEORGE WASHINGTON**

**PORT: BREMEN**

**RESIDENCES:**

- **CZECHOSLOVAKIA: BRNO**
- **US: PITTSBURGH, PA; NEW YORK, NY; CHICAGO, IL;  
AMARILLO, TX; FT, LAUDERDALE, FL**

LEVINE: Today is May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1997 and I'm here in Fort Lauderdale, Florida with Vera Beleri Rask, who came from Czechoslovakia when she was 11 years old in 1914. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. If you—if we could start with your birth date and where in Czechoslovakia you were born?

RASK: In Brno. B-R-N-O.

LEVINE: And your birth date, again, for the tape.

RASK: Oh, June 22, 1903.

LEVINE: Okay. And how do you pronounce your maiden name, your last name?

RASK: Belehrad—Belehrad.

LEVINE: Belehrad.

RASK: Which means white castle.

LEVINE: Oh. Was there a white castle somewhere—?

RASK: Well, there was. There is a story of—of some background coming from England. One of the—some man with—that came over and started the name of Belehrad.

LEVINE: Oh.

RASK: That's the way my oldest brother told me one time, because I never got to talk to my father at all because he died when I was 11 years old.

LEVINE: Oh. Now, what was your father's name?

RASK: It was Christian. Oh, no. Stephan. That's what it was, Stephan. S-T-E-P-H-A-N, Stephan.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RASK: Bielarud.

LEVINE: Do you have any memories of your father?

RASK: Oh, yes. I have memories of him, very much so. He used to be a tailor at home and he had a room there where he had his shop, and we watched him. But it wasn't very long. When I was five years old, he died because one of the irons fell on his foot and caused—caused a foot trouble, which in later years, he died when I was five years old. So I used to see him in bed while he was trying to recuperate. And Mother took me to the hospital at one time. And I remember seeing him there. She showed me his wound and all. And, well, it was quite an impression but it's more of an impression now than it was then.

LEVINE: Do you have any memories of your father, what kind of a man he was, what kind of a temperament?

RASK: Well, he was a very nice looking man, you might say, but he was a very stern man. And as far as I would see as a child—otherwise, I really don't remember much about him.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. You mostly remember him as being a [unclear]—

RASK: Yeah, yeah. Uh-hmm. Just the last of his existence.

LEVINE: And how about your mother? What was her name?

RASK: Mother was Katarina [ph].

LEVINE: Oh, that's a nice name.

RASK: Yeah.

LEVINE: And her maiden—

RASK: Vilim—V-I-L-I-M.

LEVINE: That was her maiden name?

RASK: Maiden name.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you have brothers and sisters?

RASK: Oh, yes. I have seven altogether. We were four sisters and three brothers. And we were—well, we lived with Mother for—till I was about 11, we lived with Mother. And the boys were getting a little at an age where they could help out. I think one went into a banker's office. In fact, one of my uncles was a banker, which helped a lot in my—in our time to take care of us too.

LEVINE: Well, what happened when your father died? How did your mother manage with—with [unclear]?

RASK: Well, I don't really—much of how that is done but the—the government, I think, they look into that. And in time, I went to the orphan's home. So she must have tried to arrange that, that my sister, Bella [ph], would go also. Bella was two years older than I was. She was 13 at that time. I mean—and I don't mean 13 because I entered when I was five and she was seven. So—

LEVINE: So were you in the orphanage from the time you were five until you left—

RASK: All that time, yes. Soon as Father died, we were there, from five on to 11, my age of 11.

LEVINE: And—and what about your other brothers and sisters? Where were they?

RASK: Well, they stayed home. They stayed home and I think they managed somewhere but I don't know. But I used to come and visit my mother, because this was a Catholic orphanage. And I was not Catholic so the Father, who took care of us, who was the manager and everything at the home, he saw to it that I could get to the church once a month or so. So he had a—a maid take me on a train to the town of Brno, because this was in Gurein, which is a sub—which is a town part of Brno, like a subdivision, you might say at that time.

LEVINE: How do you spell that one? G—

RASK: G-U-R-E-I-N. Gurein. And so I got to see my mother once a month and she used to—she nev—she didn't come to the home very much because it would cost money to get there. But anyhow, when I used to come to get lessons of—religious lessons at the—with the preacher privately, he'd say, "Oh, you go on home and enjoy your mother." [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. [chuckles] Now, what religion were you? What's your—

RASK: We were Protestant ---Evangelical Church, they called it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And [clears throat] were you and your sister that—that were in the orphanage, were you the youngest two?

RASK: No, there was another young one, another two years younger. Anche [ph] was her name. But Mother put in a—ad in a—in the paper of the church, if there was anybody who would want to adopt a child or take care of a child. And one lady answered. She didn't have any children and this lady lived in the town of Luch [ph]. And so she contacted my mother and Mother agreed to let her have the child to take care of. Her husband was a caretaker of the railroad station at that time. So they were in—in the means to be able to do

that. So, well, my sister—and she grew up with them till she came to this country when she was 17 years old. She was there during the World War One.

LEVINE: I see. What was life like for you in the orphanage?

RASK: Oh, it was wonderful. Really, I have fond memories of the orphanage home. But—because the man who take care of everything was very understandable. And we used to have a—we had a big garden with this home. There was a vegetable garden, orchard, a playground and places to just walk. And we could see the country outside. It was all country, the fields of wheat and things. And as we walked around, we—they gave us a little patch of ground to grow flowers in. So I had one little patch. And I can still remember the size of it, must have been maybe about seven by four or something like that. And I had beautiful flowers growing on it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Oh.

RASK: And everything was—very nice at the home. We went to school, studied and one of the teachers was very interested, seemed to always like me, because she would let me come to her room to be with her. And she showed me how to knit and do a lot of things. And—

LEVINE: Do you remember her name, that teacher?

RASK: No, I—I used to know her name but I just can't recall it right now.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RASK: And, well, I just—for anybody to be brought up in a orphan's home; it really has to be somebody that takes care of the children right. And I was fortunate that this was a wonderful little home.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was your sister's name, the one who was there too?

RASK: Biella [ph]—

LEVINE: Biella.

RASK: —was her name.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RASK: But she's—she left the orphanage earlier because at the age of 14 or somewhere there, 13, they couldn't have them any longer. So she went back and stayed with home. Mother was alone by that time because the boys and my oldest sister had been sent to this country. And there's a story connected with that, how they got to this country too.

LEVINE: Well, who came to this country first in the family?

RASK: My oldest brother.

LEVINE: And what was his name?

RASK: Jerry [ph]. He came first. But I have to explain of how that really did happen.

LEVINE: Good.

RASK: See, this lady that adopted my youngest sister had a brother that lived in this country. He lived near Pittsburgh, at town of Coriopolis. And there he had a church -- a church, and he started a missionary school. And as—as he—he wanted to have people from Czechoslovakia to come to this missionary school to help people who were migrating here at that time. So it just so happened that when she—my youngest sister was adopted, this brother came to this church. And my sister, Pauline, was selected that she could come with—back to this country to go to the missionary school. So that's how she got started. And at the same time this preacher, who was a brother of the one that adopted the—my sister, had a printing shop. And he needed young men to come and print things in Czech. So my brother—two brothers followed and came to this country and worked there. So we were always sort of provided for. And, in fact, I—I seem to have been provided all my life somehow or other.

LEVINE: Hmm. Wow. Now, had your brothers worked in those—in printing [unclear]?

RASK: Yeah, in the printing shop, which was in Pittsburgh.

LEVINE: Oh, but before that they hadn't been in [unclear]?

RASK: No, just one brother, I think, was working in the bank for a while as a teller. And so then by that time we were all here. They were all here. Mother decided she would like to come too with my sister. The two of us were left with Mother. So somehow, I don't know how she got to come, whether somebody paid her way or whichever that happened, I don't know.

LEVINE: So it was your mother and your sister and you.

RASK: Bella and me.

LEVINE: [unclear]

RASK: [Superposed] The three of us came on the George Washington—came. But the only thing is, while Mother was alone trying to make a living, she was making bedroom slippers. And, you know—and to make more money she'd be up late at night to—to make these slippers. And in time, she developed tuberculosis. Of course, at that time I did not know that it was that, that she was ill or anything like that. So when we came to Ellis Island, I noticed they separated us from Mother. And we were beginning to—Bella and I were beginning to worry. But anyhow, after awhile she did come back to us. And they let her come to this country, to Coriopolis to be with us. And there the missionaries schooled the girls at the school, took care of our rent already. They had a place for us to be.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, let's talk a little bit more about Czechoslovakia—

RASK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —before you left. Did you have grandparents there?

RASK: Well, I had aunts. Yeah. And before we left the country, Mother and Bella and I, we toured to visit these aunts and any friends that we had. And I remember she had one friend that made a little suit for me and—which I—I have a picture of it.

LEVINE: Oh, good. We'll look at it later.

RASK: It's very nice. Yeah. And so we visited one aunt that lived in—in a town near Brno too. And she—they had a place of their own, owned their own house. It was more out in the country. And when—the day that I was visiting there they served me goat milk, which I'd never eat—had before.

And it didn't taste as well as I [chuckles] thought it would. But anyhow, enjoyed it and I enjoyed her garden. She had a nice garden. There was a walk in the middle of the garden and on the sides were vegetables and flowers and everything. And in the back there was a little room where you could sit and be in the shade.

And—and my cousin just had—was the name of Bluste [ph]. At that time, I got to know her a little bit. I never did know her before. But I got to know her. And as I was there, I remember some—somebody rang a bell or something, you know. I said, "Oh, what's that?" So she—we ran out in the street and there it was the ice cream man with a little wagon. So she went and got some ice cream for us. Mother gave her a nickel or whatever it cost at the time. So that's what I do—I do remember about my last days in Czechoslovakia.

LEVINE: Were there any other preparations for leaving besides visiting your aunts? Did you—did you [unclear]?

RASK: [Superposed] No, there was nothing else.

LEVINE: Did your mother, like, sell everything she had or how did she—

RASK: Well, I don't know what—what they did with whatever she had. She did have just a—a bed and a big closet and a table by the window, which I remember when I used to come to visit her, just by this table. It looked out into the—the buildings in those days were made into U-shapes, like, so that you have a courtyard there. And I—I looked out into the courtyard. And she always made me a little hot chocolate or zwiebach. And whatever they did with that, I don't know. She must have just sold it or gotten rid of it some way.

LEVINE: Did—what was your mother like? What was her disposition?

RASK: Well, Mother was a very petite lady, as I remember her, and very gentle. And she loved music, because she—she didn't—the only thing I remember Mother ever telling me is that she used to love to go out into the woods, because they lived out in the country when she was a child—out in the woods and sing there. And otherwise, I don't remember much. But I did once—we were eating an apple. And I said, "I don't like the skin." Said, "Well, that's all right. You don't have to eat it. Just the bark, like a barkin'" [laughs]—so—

LEVINE: And did your mother—was she religious?

RASK: I think very much so. She prayed for our good will and I think that's how we really got answers through that way. And even one Christmas I remember she prayed very hard and there at the door when she opened it in the morning was a basket of flour—of food and everything.

LEVINE: Oh.

RASK: And so she gave that as a credit to her prayer.

LEVINE: Did—did she—do you remember any Christmases in Czechoslovakia?

RASK: Oh, yes. We al—we had a—before Dad died we had a nice big tree, trimmed, and presents. And she used to hide the presents in the closet before we got them. And the evening of Christmas we were all shut in a room while they were decorating the room. All of us children were in the one—in the room where Mother—Father used to do the tailoring. And we had to wait and it was dark in there—wait till she could let us go out. And I remember seeing the tree, which was so beautiful.

LEVINE: How was it decorated? Was it decorated the way we do it here?

RASK: Well, they mo—they mostly put the cookies on little strings and little paper things and chains of paper. It was mostly done at home. I don't remember any—any that were purchased for decorating. And they used to put even fruit on the tree.

LEVINE: And do you remember any other occasions or ceremonies in Czechoslovakian that [unclear]?

RASK: No, I don't remember anything outside of our home, of the town or country or anything [unclear]. I was only five years old. I don't remember anything of that. But I was just trying to recall something but nothing really—

LEVINE: How about when somebody was born or—

RASK: No, I never knew of anybody.

LEVINE: —died or any other occasion?

RASK: No.

LEVINE: Do you remember any kind of events?

RASK: No.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RASK: No. We—we actually didn't get together much with anybody that I know of.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RASK: We probably did but I don't remember any visits and things like that.

LEVINE: Okay. And how about—you went to school in the orphanage and that was—

RASK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —where you had your schooling.

RASK: Yeah, we had—went there till the—I was 11 years old, from five to 11.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How about food? Do you remember any Czechoslovakian food?

RASK: Yeah. Well, the—I don't remember the food at home but I do remember the food at the orphanage. We used to have a lot of cabbage. Oh, and I never liked it because we had to eat. Whatever they put on our plate we had to eat it. We couldn't leave the table until it was all eaten and then we used to have a lot of Cream of Wheat. We used to call it kasha [ph]. And it was a kasha to me. It just didn't taste good. [laughs] But they did serve us coffee. On Sunday afternoon they served us coffee. We called it black—called it white coffee. It was half coffee and half milk. And with it we used to select bread. We could have bread. Now, whether we wanted butter or whether we wanted lard, and all the decisions. One was—tasted as good as the other.  
[chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, and was there anything else that you liked that you can recall that you liked eating?

RASK: I used to play with the—this man that took care of the home had a grandchild. And he invited me to their little apartment. And I used to play with the little child. She was just my age and I remember her—her toys. She had a toy, which is very intriguing. It was almost—not like a train but it was a sliding

train where—where she had a—something at the top of the incline to let it run down.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

RASK: That's—that's one Christmas I do remember there.

LEVINE: Do you remember any—?

RASK: Oh, and the Christmas in the home—they—we had a choice of three presents. Everybody—just imagine, there were a hundred children of us. And they provided three presents. Whatever we asked for in the letter, we got.

LEVINE: You wrote a letter saying what u wanted?

RASK: Wrote, yeah. I—I had a letter of—one; I had a dollhouse and a book. And I don't remember much of anything else much.

LEVINE: Oh. Well, that was very—

RASK: Yeah, very nice.

LEVINE: —nice of them.

RASK: They used to have us against the walls of the big schoolroom. The tree was right in the middle of the room, be a large tree really reaching the ceiling, all lit up and marvelous with candles, which you had to be very careful, you know. [chuckles]

LEVINE: How—how would you describe yourself as an 11-year-old before you left Czechoslovakia? What kind of a little girl were you?

RASK: I was very—I might say quiet. I was almost too serious, you might say, from a picture of me. I said, “I won--- why do I look so serious?” But I—at that time, I don’t think I realized I did. But I probably didn’t have much to smile about, laugh about, you know, because I was the smallest one of the children there.

LEVINE: Oh.

RASK: And they all petted me, which—which was very nice. But it got to be a little too much. But not so much with the children but the ladies that used to come to visit. They would want to pet me and be—sit on their lap and things like that, which I ad—I adjusted to it all right. I liked it and everything. But I never got used to it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RASK: So that’s about all I remember as—as a child.

LEVINE: When you look back at that time now—

RASK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —when you were in the orphanage, how—how do you—how do you think about it as far as its effect on you—

RASK: I think it—I think about it as always loving the people that were around me, because they were loving me. And that kind of stuck to me. I could never

think of anybody not being nice, even to this day. I cannot see why anybody sees anything wrong in a person. That's the opinion I have of people, really.

LEVINE: Well, that was quite a good lesson to—

RASK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —to have learned.

RASK: It is.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RASK: I think people are—want to do good, if you show them that you sort of respond. I don't know if I responded but I—I let things happen as they happen. I didn't try to fight it. I didn't try to be opposite to things. I always agreed with things.

LEVINE: So then when you and your mother—do you remember you and—anything your mother packed and took with you or anything you personally wanted to bring with you when you left for America?

RASK: Well, the only thing that I regret now is this teacher that took me in and showed me how to knit and all—one lady that she knew gave me a Christmas present of a big yarn of ball—ball of yarn. And she—and as I was knitting it—I didn't know what it was. But anyhow, she showed me I should knit. And as I was knitting there would always be a little toy come out of it. There were—was a little—little—little dolls and little dominoes. And I don't know. To this day, I don't remember everything. But there was quite a few dolls and little things I wish I had kept. But I couldn't keep it because all the children want to play with it. Before I knew it, it was gone. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. You would have taken that with you [unclear].

RASK: [Superposed] Oh, I would have. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. And do you remember then the departure when you and your mother and sister actually left?

RASK: Yeah, we—we left—went to the train to Bremen. And that night I—I knew something was wrong with Mother. That was the first time I realized there must be something wrong because she—she wasn't sleeping and everything. And as a child, it just—something happened, I figured. But she got strong enough to get on and—and get to this country.

LEVINE: And then you left on—on the George Washington from Bremen?

RASK: Yeah. That's right.

LEVINE: [several words unclear] port?

RASK: [Superposed] Yeah. That's where the port. Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you have any kind of examinations before you—

RASK: No.

LEVINE: —you left or—

RASK: Nothing, nothing.

LEVINE: And tell—

RASK: Not that I know of. I don't know.

LEVINE: Okay. Tell about the voyage. What was that like?

RASK: Oh, I enjoyed it. I'd be running up and down the ships. And I used to follow Mother down into the hall where she had a trunk full of things where she would go once in awhile to look at things. And I would stay at the top of the steps and she let me—she let the pocketbooks stay with me up there, or it just so happened that it was there. So [unclear] I looked and wanted to see what was in that pocketbook. And Mother says, "Oh, oh, no. I got a lot"—she—she was afraid I'd be losing something. [laughs]

LEVINE: And was there any—were you in a cabin? Were you in a dormitory-like steerage [unclear] or how—

RASK: [Superposed] No, no, there—we were all in one cabin, the three of us.

LEVINE: Three.

RASK: Yeah. Whether there was a fourth one, I don't remember.

LEVINE: And do you remember anything about the food or anything else that happened before?

RASK: No, I don't even remember that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RASK: All I knew, I never got seasick or anything.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, you mentioned earlier that this was the last trip that the ship made before the war broke out.

RASK: [Superposed] That's right. Before—as the war—

LEVINE: The war broke out at that time?

RASK: [Superposed] It broke out while we were on board because they used to not have any lights. They wouldn't allow any lights so no one could follow us.

LEVINE: And did you hear that, that the war has broken out or how—do you remember anything about that?

RASK: Well, I—I don't know. Probably at that moment I didn't realize it was a big war but I knew something was going on. And then I—I knew in time that's when war broke out.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember when the George Washington arrived in the New York harbor? Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty or do you remember seeing New York or—

RASK: No, no. I didn't because we didn't really get to view anything outside of just -- --they were taking us to the train.

LEVINE: Okay. Were you—Ellis Island. Do you [unclear]—

RASK: [Superposed] Ellis Island. We took—we were on our boat first to—

LEVINE: Right.

RASK: —to get to the train. And then—then the train took us. Somebody put— whoever took us to the train made us board the right train for Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh.

LEVINE: Well, now. At Ellis Island, what happened to you there? Could you just talk about that a little bit?

RASK: No, all I know is that we got in there, just big room. And that's where we were separated but that's all I remember, seeing the big room. I can still see that big room, the way it is now.

LEVINE: And do you—how long were you there?

RASK: Not very long on the island. We weren't there—I think as we landed, we mostly right away almost that we left.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. So they took your mother aside probably and examined her.

RASK: It was—well, how it happened that she got separated. All I knew, I was against a fence and she was on the other side of the fence. And I said, "Oh, how come Mother's over there?"

LEVINE: And—but did you—did you get examined? Do you remember anything like that?

RASK: No, no. I didn't get examined that I remember. I don't remember that. Mother did.

LEVINE: Yeah. And then you were taken to the train.

RASK: Yeah.

LEVINE: And do you remember the train trip?

RASK: Not too much. I remember as we got to—to Coriopolis leaving the station one—a young man came with a big two—big limousine, an open car, in those days. And they took us into where we were going to live from the station. And this young man was one of the brothers of one of the missionary sister—missionary girls that drove us in that. That's the first—that's the first time I ever got a ride on the—in the car. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, were there—okay, we're going to pause here for one—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A] [BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: Okay, we're resuming here. So what else, besides—you said when you got to Pennsylvania. Were there other things that struck you as new and different those first few days and weeks?

RASK: Well, all I—I can remember is that I enjoyed all my surroundings. I enjoyed the children at school, and I enjoyed the children I got to know through the church where this preacher that made it possible for us to come had his church. And I used to come to his place for dinner. And then we had a Sunday school there so I got to know the children. And we used to go to their home. And there was one family especially that would let us come to their—Bella and I—we'd come to visit them. They had a garden in the back. And every Sunday we'd go there. Whether they liked it or not, we went there [chuckles] because it was a good meal. In those days, and my sister, Bella, did the cooking for all of us.

One of the church members had a house that was out in the country too, and they let us live there. So my brothers and—my brothers and Bella and I,

we—there were two brothers. Yeah, the three brothers and Bella and I—five of us—my sister, the biggest sister, oldest sister was still in the missionary home when we lived in that house provided by the neighbors. And this neighbor, I remember, used to bake bread, big, round bread and, boy, I enjoyed that. And she had—they had a piece of land down off the ground. There was a road first as you went down the hill and then—then there was their land. And it was a farm. She had a cow so I used to go with her to milk the cows and see them. And that was very enjoying.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And were there a lot of Czechoslovakian people in—

RASK: There were a lot of people in Coriopolis. It was sort of a settlement of them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember social clubs or anything else connected—?

RASK: No, no. I don't remember any of that.

LEVINE: How about a newspaper? Was there a Czechoslovakian newspaper?

RASK: There was a paper. At that time, I didn't know about it. I didn't know about the—my—the shop that—my brothers were still printing for this man until I was—later on, till about fif—16, 17. Then I got to know really where they worked, because in the meantime—well, I didn't tell you of how things happened when we got into the coun—this country yet.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay, well, did you—did you go to school then?

RASK: Yeah, and went to school in Coriopolis.

LEVINE: And how did that compare with the school that you'd been in Czechoslovakia?

RASK: Well, it's pretty much the same way. The teachers were very nice to me and, before I knew it, they advanced me a little bit at a time to—because they put me in the first grade first. And I remember they used to sing a song, “My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean.” And I’d say, “What kind of a Bonnie was that that could be lying over the ocean?” [laughs]

LEVINE: [laughs] And how did you fare with learning English?

RASK: Yeah.

LEVINE: How was that for you?

RASK: Naturally, I don't know how—to this day how I really managed to get—catch it, because it was just by the schoolbooks that I got to know about it. Yeah.

LEVINE: So you didn't have a particular problem with the language?

RASK: No, I didn't have any particular problem about that. Maybe—maybe a little bit about grammar because it—the grammar in—is a little difficult to understand. But I managed—I always managed to have pretty good grades, I would say. [laughs]

LEVINE: And how about the religion, the missionary? Was it Evangelical?

RASK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RASK: Presbyterian or Evangelic. Whichever they called it, I don't know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And—

RASK: I guess it's Presbyterian because they call—call it PMTS, PMTS School. Presbyterian Teachers School.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

RASK: Yeah.

LEVINE: And was there anything else about your getting settled when—once you and your mother and your sister got here?

RASK: Well, the only thing I do remember is one teacher. She was very cooperative with the children. She made us really try to learn something and would put the best—one that got the best grades would be on the first seat. And so we—she had—we had 10 rows in one aisle, 10 seats in one aisle. So the—and I noticed what she was trying to do and I said, "Well, gee. If that fellow can sit there on the first seat, I can too. Why not?" So that made me study much more. And I give that credit to that teacher, remembering her all this time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, did your mother have the attitude that you should become Americanized or was she more—?

RASK: Well, she was never with us long enough. She died a month right after she arrived.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how was that for you when your mother died?

RASK: Well, I remember when—when we came to this country in this little town, Coriopolis, at the apartment I used to have to go to school. When I went to

school one day, somebody said that there's a funeral home right there. And they went to see the lady that was there, see. So [unclear] I went to see her. And that's the first time I saw my mother after she left for the hospital, was to see her in that funeral home. And I didn't tell the children it was my mother. And then I remember seeing her in the church. And that's—they had a funeral for her in the church.

LEVINE: Well, how did you feel, being 11 years old and in a new country and your mother died?

RASK: It is strange enough to say that I had no feeling one way or another, only of feeling, you might say, love. Feeling that, somehow or other, with so many nice people around me, I had nothing to worry about.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And is there anything else? Then you stayed at the missionary school? Or was it [unclear] school?

RASK: [Superposed] No, no. I wasn't at the—we had the apartment there in Coriopolis. Then after the apartment, these people from the church let us use their house, to rent their house. Then by that time—it was about a year or so—my oldest sister graduated from the missionary school. So she got a job in Oakland, Pennsylvania. And she—Bella and I went with her to have that job. So we kind of closed the home and the boys went along whichever way they knew. So I—we stayed with my sister. Pauline was her name, Pabbla [ph]. And she bought everything for us and ke—kept us for quite some time. And there was the ladies of the church. They got kind of interested in us too. So they—there was one particular lady who—who liked us all. And she had a little cottage so she ga—let us rent that little cottage.

LEVINE: Hmm, in Oakland?

RASK: In Oak Park.

LEVINE: Oak—

RASK: Oakland. Yeah, Oakland. Not Oak Park. Oakland.

LEVINE: Oakland, uh-huh. So your sister—what kind of a job did Pauline get?

RASK: She had a—like a—you might take social work to take care of the people, the immigrants that came, to see that they were taken care of, as jobs and when they were ill or something, and then try to maybe—I don't know that she influenced them in any religion or anything, because there—that wasn't really forced on them or anything. It was just to take care of the people that came from—country. Because it was a goo—a mining center there. And so they helped a lot of those immigrants that came over to—to the mining.

LEVINE: Were—were they mostly coming from Czechoslovakia?

RASK: I wouldn't know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. But it was coal mining? Is that [unclear]?

RASK: [Superposed] Coal mining.

LEVINE: It was coal mining.

RASK: Yeah, uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And so then you—you went to public school in Oakland?

RASK: Yeah, I went to public school in Oakland and that—that was very nice too. I—how I kept—actually, only had books—schoolbooks. I didn't have books of any other kind. So it's a miracle of how one can get ingest—adjusted, really.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Well, let's see. So then you—how long did you and Bella stay in school before you—you left and started working?

RASK: Well, my sister—my—we stayed with my sister for a while. I don't—just how long it was. But anyhow, she—she changed jobs in—she was cha—at that time, my brother, one brother was old enough—old enough. He got married by that time. So this brother's father-in-law said that I should come and live with them, because Pauline had to go and taking the other job. She didn't have any place for us. So I went with him and Bella went with one of the ladies that were at the church to help with their family. They took her in. So that was all taken care of at that time and I lived with my brother for—for quite a while in Pittsburgh.

LEVINE: And what brother was that?

RASK: Jerry.

LEVINE: Jerry.

RASK: Yeah. But the father—her father is the one that took care of the expenses for me.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Uh-huh. And so then you went to school in Pittsburgh too?

RASK: Pittsburgh, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RASK: Yeah. Yeah, I remember that was very nice too. In fact, I—I like to say—don't want to be proud of myself but, anyhow, I want to state that I used to like drawing. And this one teacher, she—drawing teacher—she made us draw something. And I drew a picture of an apple tree. And somehow or other, she liked it so she put it in a frame and put it on the schoolroom, hung it up. And just the other day, I was thinking, 'Gee, I wish I could visit to see if it's still there.' [laughs]

LEVINE: How did you feel when she took your picture and put it up?

RASK: Well, I thought, 'Gee, well, that's'—it's funny. I never have much of an opinion of things. I just love it. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And let's see. Then you were in Pittsburgh. Now, did you finish school in Pittsburgh?

RASK: Yes, I finished school in Pittsburgh. And then later on I left my brother, living with him, and Pauline got a job right in Pittsburgh. So I stayed at the YW while she had a job too, stayed there too. And at the YW I finished high school, going to Allegheny [ph] High School.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Allegheny?

RASK: Yeah, Allegheny High School. I finished when—

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then what did you do after that?

RASK: While I was at the YW, I used to work in the dining room as a cashier. And on Sundays I'd be in the office to try to pay some of my rent.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

RASK: My living there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And then did you—did you work outside the Y—

RASK: No, that's the only work I did till I finished high school.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and then what?

RASK: And then when I finished high school, Pauline was le—going to leave for Brooklyn, New York. She got a job there. And she said, "Would you like to come with me?" I said, "Yeah, if you get me a job." So—because in the meantime, I did get a job leaving high school. One of the teachers recommended me for the office and I got the job. And so I enjoyed that. It was with an insurance company. And so when Pauline asked if I wanted to go with her I said, "Yeah, if you get a job." So she did get a job. The lady that hired her with the International Institute in Brooklyn got me to be the stenographer for the Improvement of the Poor. At that time, they were helping the improvement of the poor. So I was the stenographer there for a while.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, was Pauline a social worker? Is that what she was doing?

RASK: A social worker, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RASK: She was with the International Institute taking care of immigrants from different countries, but mainly her own country, I would say, because there was a na—a different nationality for each country.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And so how was Brooklyn? How did you like [unclear]?

RASK: Oh, I liked Brooklyn. Yeah, I got many friends there. We—and—and I stayed at the YW in Brooklyn and we—we just had a grand time with all the—the—the International Institute had a club too. So I joined that club of the different nationalities. So I got to know some very good friends there.

LEVINE: Now, was there a Czechoslovakian population in Brooklyn in the neighborhood where you were?

RASK: [Superposed] Not too much, no. No. There was mostly Spanish, you might say.

LEVINE: Hmm. And—and was—was Pauline also staying at the YW?

RASK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, you were both there.

RASK: Yeah, we were both there. Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: I see. And do you remember what you did for entertainment or for enjoyment?

RASK: Well, we did. We had this club. So we used to go to a lot of hikes up at Staten Island and mount—Bear Mountain and all around the country. I loved it. Every Sunday we'd go somewhere. And then we even performed a little act of the "Silas Marner."

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RASK: Yeah. So we just—we used to have a—little dances and performing too.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And it must have been a kind of international community then.

RASK: Yeah, it was international.

LEVINE: [unclear].

RASK: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how did you meet your husband?

RASK: Oh, that's another story. [laughs] When I was working in Brooklyn af—when I worked as—with the Improvement of the Poor, this one girl, a Spanish girl—she had a job with the Guatemalan Council. She was leaving for Europe to—to visit but leaving then because she was going to get married. See? So she—I said, “Well, can I get your job?” So sure enough, I got her job. So I worked for the Council of Guatemala for about a year or so and got to know a little Spanish too.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then was your husband somehow connected with—

RASK: No, no. Then when—then I—the—the first job was with the Council. But then—then she left—she was working for a Mr. Ruit [ph] when she came back from Spain. And—or maybe I'm getting ahead of my story. But anyhow, well, when she—when—this is the second time when she came back from [unclear] she left her job with the Ruit Oil Company. So when she left that job too, I said, “Can I have it?” “Yeah.” So Mr. Ruit hired me for that job. And that job, I stayed with him and he—he wanted it changed and moved down to either Arkansas somewhere to get a refinery. So we waited

till he said, "Well, let's just stay in New York for awhile anyway," until he got—knew where to se—to send me. So she said, "But go to Chicago in the meantime and from there I'll decide whether it'll be Arkansas or whatever it'll be."

So I went to Chicago. Why he wanted to be there, I don't know. But I went there and opened up the office and took care of the whole thing. And while I was—the first day that I worked when I got back in the morning there were—the doors—I couldn't get in. I said, "I wonder why." Oh, there was—the painters were in there working. So I said, "Well, I have to get in." Says, "Well, you'll have to wait awhile." So that's—and then after I got in, then I got to know this young man that was painting.

LEVINE: Oh.

RASK: [laughs] And before you know, when he got through with the job he came back with—all dressed up in a derby and a long coat and wanted to know if I'd like to see the new show, the Grand Theater that opened up in New York. I said, "Sure." So from then on, that's the only one I ever—that I kept going with him. I did know other young fellows but I didn't care about them, but he kind of stuck. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was his name?

RASK: His name is Jens [ph] Rask, Jens Christian Rask. He was Danish.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RASK: And that's how you got to know the Danish—his brother-in-law, his brother.

LEVINE: Right. And so then, did you marry soon after or—

RASK: No. I—I was working and, oh, a few months—maybe five, six months Mr. Ruit decided to go to Amarillo, Texas and—and bought a refinery there. So I said—told my husband, “I’m leaving”—but not my husband but my boyfriend, I was leaving for Amarillo. And he said, “Well, that’s all right. I’ll go there too.” So he took a train and—we took the train and—we weren’t together but, anyhow, we took the train and found a house—a room to rent. And then he found a room to rent right next door with a bathroom in between [laughs] in a nice little house a lady had. And, well, we stayed there, and I worked there and saw the refinery that he had and all. And it was very nice work. One day he came and he said he wants to go back to California because he knows he can get a job over there. He had been working there before he came to this country. And he felt like he could go back and make a living there, instead of in Texas. He wasn’t getting a job.

LEVINE: So—

RASK: So I said, “Well”—

LEVINE: Before you went to Chicago, he had been working in California? Is that—

RASK: Yeah, that’s right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RASK: And so when he said that, I said, “Well, you go ahead but don’t expect me to follow you.” I said, “This is my job and that’s it. I don’t want to go somewhere I don’t have a job.” So I guess he thought it over but he stayed. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So then how long did you stay in Amarillo?

RASK: Well, it was about three, four months later that we did get married, and in Amarillo we stayed only another four or five months. We didn't stay in Amarillo very long. But in the meantime, while we were still there, he did get jobs and he got to be quite a—got his own jobs. And I—how he got his first job is --- the man I worked for—he had—he had me go to the bank everyday. You know, what—whatever I needed to. And I talked to one of the—oh, the tellers. In fact, he was a part owner of the bank. I said, "You wouldn't need any painter, would you?" [chuckles] So I get—I gave him his first job. [laughs] And he had a lot of work from—through that real estate—it was a real estate and bank combined.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So then when you left Amarillo you both went back to Chicago?

RASK: To Chicago, yeah, because then his family was—his mother and father and the family were coming over. So he decided to go back up there. And he got his old job that he used to have in Chicago.

LEVINE: I see. So you went back to Chicago. You were married then.

RASK: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then how many children did you have?

RASK: Just the one. We had the one child. Then nine years later we got the daughter.

LEVINE: [chuckles] And your children's names?

RASK: The first one was Jens S. Rask and then one is Kay [ph] Rask.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RASK: That's all.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And when you look back on coming to this country as an 11-year-old—

RASK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —how—do you think it affected you very much as far as the kind of person you are? Or do you think that experience of uprooting and coming here—

RASK: Well, I don't know that—the only life I knew was in this country, actually, because the first years I didn't know anything about my country so much. So that I really am more American than I am Czech. Now, you take my sister that stayed there till she was 16, or 18, rather. She was really Cze—and I didn't go for it, because she used to like to go to the Czech dances. And I said, "No, I don't—I don't like them." But it was one way of going to a dance anyway. But I—I didn't continue to—

LEVINE: Do you feel you have any sort of sides to you that are Czechoslovakian?

RASK: Any what?

LEVINE: Any sides to you or any aspects or qualities that—

RASK: Of my—of my Czech—of Czech background, you mean?

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-hmm.

RASK: No, I—I really don't know if I do. Well, the only thing I can think of right now is that I think the background is to study in a way. I don't know whether that's any Czech way of being, but studying is what influenced me a little of the background, because I wanted to know what the difference here is now, see? But it's very vague. I don't know whether there's much too it. I feel more Americanized than anything.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. When you look back on your life, what makes you feel proud or feel satisfied that you were able to do?

RASK: What makes me satisfied that I was able to do? Able to do it without any difficulty, you might say. If I had -- if I had to do it, I just did it. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, yeah. Did you ever have any heroes or people that you really looked up to, either people that you knew personally or people that you were [unclear]?

RASK: [Superposed] No, I never would say hero. No, I had very nice acquaintances that I admired but nothing that you would say hero.

LEVINE: Were—were your teachers some of the [unclear]?

RASK: [Superposed] The teachers. Yeah, they were influenced. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RASK: There was a—there's a big difference in the teachers, I could see. One teacher was really—made an effort to make you study or make you learn. And—but never any—any personal contact. The only teacher that made any personal contact was the one that taught me how to knit and do sewing in the orphan's home.

LEVINE: And it seems as though flowers were always a big part of your life. You mentioned the flowers in different places.

RASK: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I liked the woods and gardens and so on.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Well, is there anything else that maybe we haven't touched on that is part of your story of—of coming to this country and [unclear]?

RASK: No, I think I've touched that pretty well, as far as my remembrance is.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about this time in your life? How is that for you?

RASK: Well, I feel pretty happy. [chuckles] I'm fortunate to come to this point where I can be with my daughter and have my son around in the family. It just seems like if you let things happen to the good, the good will happen.

LEVINE: Well, that sounds like the perfect place to end. I want to thank you so much—

RASK: [chuckles] You're welcome.

LEVINE: —for a very interesting interview.

RASK: Yeah.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm speaking with Vera Rask, who came here at 11 years of age in 1914—

RASK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —from Czechoslovakia and I'm signing off. Thank you. Okay, we're—we're resuming here. You were mentioning—

RASK: Yeah, the one thing I could mention as far as situations of life within you, I figured that as long as I got along without the effort of parents, I wasn't going to interfere with my children's getting along. I figured they would know how to get along and I'm glad they did.

LEVINE: Oh, that's lovely. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]