

EI-950

ROSE RUDOMINE BENDER

BIRTHDATE: JUNE 10, 1905

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AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 92

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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FRANCE, 1914

AGE: 8

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PORT: LE HAVRE, FRANCE

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Okay. Today is September 24th, 1997 and I am here in Manhattan with Rose Bender, who came from France in 1914 at—we think at the age of about nine. And today, at the time of this interview, Mrs. Bender is 92 years of age. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Well, I'm delighted to be here and I want—

BENDER: I'm—

LEVINE: —to—I really look forward. I can tell by some of the things you said already that this is going to be a wonderful interview.

BENDER: Thank you.

LEVINE: L—let's start at the beginning. If you would say again for the tape, your birth date.

BENDER: See, the—the—I—I asked my brother to send me my—in France, it's not like here when you're born. Your h—your—your birth certificate i—in

city—there's a record of it in city hall. But there, there isn't, you see. But he said all the documents were destroyed when the Germans came in, so we could never know how old we were. Maybe I—I'm older. Maybe I'm younger. I have no idea. But according to the way I remember, I know it was a—it—just a—just before the war that we came over.

LEVINE: Okay.

BENDER: And I remember the name of the ship and it was—it was—it was destroyed by the Germans in—during the First World War. And it was the Adriatic. Would you believe it?

LEVINE: Isn't that wonderful? That's great. Now—so—but you think, even though you don't have your birth certificate, you think you were born June 10th.

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: And we think maybe 1905.

BENDER: Maybe.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: I'm not sure.

LEVINE: Okay.

BENDER: I always had trouble when I went to—needed a birth certificate.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Okay. Now, where in France were you born?

BENDER: In Paris.

LEVINE: And did you live in Paris—

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: —up until you left for the United States?

BENDER: That's right.

LEVINE: And what was your mother's name?

BENDER: My mother's name was Cecile [PH].

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

BENDER: I wouldn't remember.

LEVINE: Okay. And your father's name.

BENDER: My father's name was Kasriel, K-A-S-R-I-E-L. And my mother told me—my father told me that the name meant a strong man. And I always wanted to—to name a child after him but I was never successful.

LEVINE: Well, wh—what was your father like when you were a little girl?

BENDER: Beautiful. There he is.

LEVINE: Ah.

BENDER: Very brilliant, spoke five languages. Very, very n—wonderful.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And—and his last name was Rudomine.

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay. And [clears throat] now, did you have grandparents in Paris?

BENDER: No. They—I never knew my grandparents. They were left in—in Russia.

LEVINE: I see. So your family had come from Russia to Paris.

BENDER: And they married there. You know, those days, you didn't go—take a girl out and—and court her. There was always an arrangement. Two families got together and that's the way my parents mar—were married. So my grandmother knew—not my grandma—my mother knew my father's mother and they got together and th—that's how they married.

LEVINE: I see. Now, was—was both your mother and your father's side of the family from Russia originally?

BENDER: Originally, yes.

LEVINE: And now, did ei—either your mother or father grow up in Russia, do you know?

BENDER: Well, they must—I don't know. I don't remember. All I know is that I knew that they—it was an arrangement made. The families knew each other.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: And that I don't know.

LEVINE: Okay.

BENDER: But I know that my mother was very young when we le—when I was—I remember her as a young woman.

LEVINE: When—wh—what's the time that you're remembering her now? What—what—what—

BENDER: The time I remember her is when she was 40 years old and my father—and my younger sister was born. And she was a baby still in arms when we ca—not a baby; she was a year old when we came over. But the funniest part is when we came over, the five girls were all dressed alike, regardless of age. And I remember the Immigration men laughed. They were hysterical and they loved us. And they made us stand there to look at us.

LEVINE: Ah. Well, now, h—how—were you the oldest child?

BENDER: No, I was—

LEVINE: Who was the oldest?

BENDER: My—I had two—four brothers and one sister older than I was.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENDER: I was the seventh.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and then after you—

BENDER: I had—I had three sisters. I just lost my sister before I came in here.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENDER: The week I came in she died and I couldn't even bury her.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BENDER: And that was the most tra—I—I can't get over it yet.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: She was the youngest.

LEVINE: So where—where did you get these beautiful clothes that were all—

BENDER: My—I had a very wealthy uncle, who was a designer for—for m—what's the name of that famous—what's the name? Paka [PH]. A house in Paris; he was a designer, made a lot of money and he took us to the Gallery Lafayette and he bought all the clothes for the—for all the girls. I remember that.

LEVINE: Well, can you describe what they looked like?

BENDER: They were—they were chalet dresses and they were white with blue polka dots, and we had straw hats with blue tops and the—the string is hanging down. And the five were—even the baby in arms was dressed like that. And I got such—I remember how they patted us.

LEVINE: Wow. You must have been beautiful, the five of you. Yeah.

BENDER: Well, I had a—my—yes, my sisters were beautiful.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENDER: They were just beautiful.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about life before you came. W—when you think back of your life in Paris, what [unclear]?

BENDER: It wasn't very good.

LEVINE: What do you remember about it?

BENDER: I remember there was a very—a outbreak of anti-Semis—it was during the Dreyfus case. I don't know if you remember.

LEVINE: Yes.

BENDER: He was exonerated during the Second World War. And they get—they got after all the Jewish people. And I remember my father taking me home from school, crossing the park, and they got after him and hit him and called him a dirty Jew and hit him very hard. That's when my uncle came in from America and told us we had to get out of there. And I was

also—played with a little boy, and the mother grabbed him, said not to play with the dirty Jew. I never forgot that.

LEVINE: No, you wouldn't.

BENDER: No. And I never forgot my father being hit and I was standing there and weeping. Three men came at him. So where they took us out of this—that school and took us to the—Baron Rothschild had a private school for Jewish children and that's where I went to school. It was beautiful.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, what was your father doing for work when he was in Paris?

BENDER: He—we had a shoe store.

LEVINE: And your mother? Well, she was taking care of her children.

BENDER: What? Oh, my God, yes.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BENDER: She nur—nursed all nine of us.

LEVINE: Wow. And do you remember the house you lived in?

BENDER: Big apartment, what to me was big; maybe it isn't now. And I can't tell you the street but I kn—I know it was right near, around the corner for—from R—Riv—Riverlee [PH].

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: And I'm thinking about that accident that happened recently near [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: And my grandmother lived in the country. I'll never forget. And she used to come and get me to stay overnight with her. And I cried so much she had to take me home that very night. I was lonesome. [chuckles] I was homesick. She almost killed me. [laughter]

LEVINE: Now, let's see. So you went to—you went to a public school—

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: —at first.

BENDER: First.

LEVINE: And then when the anti-Semitism—

BENDER: I went to B—Baron Rothschild.

LEVINE: And tell me about that, anything you can remember.

BENDER: It was beautiful. And they—we had lunch there and we—it was a lovely—we had love—he—teachers that were Jewish and taught us Hebrew. I still remember one prayer in Hebrew.

LEVINE: Oh, why don't you say it?

BENDER: Well, I don't remember. It goes [speaking in Hebrew]. I don—I forgot the rest.

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm. And what else do you remember about school? Do you remember what—what the teachers—

BENDER: Not—

LEVINE: —were like or what you played—

BENDER: They were very nice and I was always a favorite; I don't know why. Yes, we played. It was a big courtyard, I remember, and we played there. And that's all I remember of that. And I remember that when I found out—we found out we were leaving France, we were—had to be vaccinated. And I'll never forget that.

LEVINE: What happened?

BENDER: It was queer, the vaccination, and they wouldn't let us leave until we were vaccinated. And we had to be. And I remember being vaccinated in school, something that doesn't happen here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: Of course, that's a long time ago. It's—

LEVINE: Yes, it is.

BENDER: —changed, must have changed a lot since.

LEVINE: Do you—was your family observant as—as Jewish people?

BENDER: Very. My f—my father used to get up every morning very early and put his—what do you call those things—on his hands—

LEVINE: [unclear].

BENDER: —and a prayer shawl and would pray. And I just gave away his prayer shawl—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: —when I came here. My—I didn't; my son-in-law did and I was glad somebody got it. I kept it when he died.

LEVINE: Wow, uh-hmm.

BENDER: And I was glad somebody—I hope they take good care of it. It came from France. And my grandmother made a—a cover for it and embroidered in gold thread with a star on it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-huh.

BENDER: It was beautiful. I could have given it to the Jewish Museum.

LEVINE: I see.

BENDER: But I had—

LEVINE: Or the Ellis Island Museum, for that matter.

BENDER: I didn't know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: But my accident happened so fast that I couldn't do anything.

LEVINE: Right, uh-huh. Well, let's talk more about—what was your father like when you were a little girl? What—how was he with you?

BENDER: Wonderful. He used to sing to us, tell stories, but not American ones, the ones in Russia, very funny ones. And he had a beautiful voice, loved the opera. He used to go—in order—in order to hear the opera, he used to go to the last balcony. He told—and it cost a dollar there. But he had a—a lover of music.

LEVINE: And how about your mother? What—what was her [unclear]?

BENDER: Well, my mother was different, quiet, not—well, my father over—overpowered her. You know, he never made her feel important, I remember.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

BENDER: They came from different families but I remember my father always overpowered her, and she—I always felt she was so downtrodden. But she was very bright and she had such wonderful—she could—such things to us, like she'd say to me one day, "You know, a mother has a large apron." I said, "Why?" She said, "Because she can cover all her children's sins." I thought that was beautiful.

LEVINE: That is beautiful. Can you remember any other kinds of sayings that she told you?

BENDER: Not right now.

LEVINE: That's beautiful.

BENDER: Yeah. But so many good things.

LEVINE: Can you remember your mother's attitudes about what she wanted for you, how she wanted you to be or—

BENDER: Well, she—oh, nat—naturally, she wanted the best for everything. But she was so busy. She did—in those days, she did her washing, I remember. She cooked three meals a day and she was a wonderful cook—

LEVINE: What are the foods—

BENDER: —and baker. Ah!

LEVINE: —foods and bakery goods you remember?

BENDER: Won—she used to make her own challas [PH], do—she'd get up at five in the morning and ma—make rolls for us to have for breakfast. She was a very good mother.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, now would you say that when you were in Paris you were more or less middle class?

BENDER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: You were—

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: —comfortable?

BENDER: Yes, very.

LEVINE: And—uh-huh.

BENDER: We were in—we were never in want. We were never rich but we always had—well fed and well clothed.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: And well shoed.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: I know that.

LEVINE: Did your mother have any help with all those children?

BENDER: No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: But I—we used to help. I used to help her, as little as I was.

LEVINE: What did you do?

BENDER: Well, I used to clean for—help her clean. And when she—cooking, if I was home. I'd help her prepare it. That's how I became a good cook.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENDER: She was a wonderful cook. She could have been a chef.

LEVINE: Well, can you remember any other dishes, what she made and how she made them?

BENDER: She used to make gefilte fish the best and she used to roast ducks, geese, make her own fat. And she'd bake, make jellies. She always had 'em made and put up pickles, I remember. A lot of pickles and make—and corn her own—and pickle her own corned beef. She was wonderful.

LEVINE: Mmm, uh-hmm.

BENDER: She'd never buy it from the butcher. I used to see her do it with spices and put it away. She was the most marvelous cook.

LEVINE: Wow. And—and did you—did you do things like go to the store and so—

BENDER: Oh, yes, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: I remember in France my mother sent me to the store and I could never eat Chinese food. A Chinaman ran after me and was—to get—to grab me. And I screamed so loud that—that there was a firehouse there and they came out and grabbed him and arrested him. I could never forget it and I never, never went into a Chinese restaurant or laundry.

LEVINE: [laughs]

BENDER: It stayed with me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: I could never forget that man's face, even—I—I'm older now.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Are there any other kinds of incidents that stand out in your mind from when you were a little girl in Paris?

BENDER: I can't remember. All I know is we just—I—I remember the gardens at [unclear] in—in France. We used to go there. And my father took us on picnics. That's all I can remember.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And do you remember your older brothers—

BENDER: Yes, very much.

LEVINE: —when they—when you were little?

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, you mentioned they were the ones who came first?

BENDER: No, my father and one brother.

LEVINE: Okay. So now, why—you mentioned that your father came—he came after these three men attacked him? Is that when he [unclear]?

BENDER: Yes. That's when we left.

LEVINE: And your uncle came back from America to France?

BENDER: Yes. He came to visit us.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: And he saw what happened to my father.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: And he said, "This is no place for you." He said—he came from Russia and—and—and immigrated here. And he said, "In America, you won't get this. It's"—in other words, he lined the streets with gold, you know. So we came. We were very unhappy here, maybe in the first few years. Very.

LEVINE: Well, let's—let's—let's talk first before we talk about what happened here. This uncle was your father's brother?

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: And so then did he make the arrangements or—

BENDER: No. N—the uncle that came here was my fa—my mother's—

LEVINE: Your mother's brother.

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay. But he told your father—

BENDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: —he should come [unclear]—

BENDER: And he—and he sent us passage to come over.

LEVINE: So—so your—it was your father and your oldest brother who went first.

BENDER: Came here to get an apartment and see that we had somewheres to live. And I'll never forget. We lived on—on the fifth floor. And my

mother said, "How could you? Five floors." He said, "Well, I—you want to be nearer to God, so you are." He had the most beautiful sense of humor. I—I really—I inherited from—I had inherited that from him.

LEVINE: Wonderful. Okay, so wh—then how much time passed between the time your moth—your father and your brother came—

BENDER: Just a few months.

LEVINE: I see. And then do you remember what—what happened? Did your mother sell everything or how—

BENDER: No, we sent it over.

LEVINE: Oh, you sent it over.

BENDER: She came over with, I remember, brass pots, beautiful, and china. The furniture, we left there. We bought furni—they bought furniture here. But all her belongings, linens, we shipped it over.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENDER: I don't know how they did it then but I wasn't aware, you know, of that.

LEVINE: Right. Did you, personally, bring anything with you?

BENDER: No, I was too young.

LEVINE: Okay. Do you remember leaving? Do you remember saying—

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: —goodbye to people?

BENDER: We started to cry when we left. And when we came over we cried because we didn't like it here. We—the language barrier with the—I wanted to play with them and they wouldn't play with me because I couldn't speak English. And they started calling me Frenchy and I didn't like it. And they said to me, "Can you speak Yiddish?" And I said, "No," and they taught me Yiddish.

LEVINE: Who taught you? The children?

BENDER: The children. It was a Jewish neighborhood but beautiful, beautiful neighborhood. It is—it isn't like it is now. Now, it's all black and Puerto Ricans.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So when you took the Adriatic, where did you take the Adriatic, the ship, from?

BENDER: From—ah, what's the name?

LEVINE: Le Havre?

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh.

BENDER: We took a train and then we got off at Le Havre and then we got on the bo—the ship. And the—when we got to Liverpool, they went on strike and we had to get off the ship and stay overnight—

LEVINE: Oh, wow.

BENDER: —to get on the Adriatic.

LEVINE: Oh, so you started out on a different ship?

BENDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Huh. Do you remember which one you started out on?

BENDER: No, I don't. But I remember—and we were so frightened because that Liverpool, it was a terrible city. Terrible.

LEVINE: What do you remember about it?

BENDER: Oh! I was—I was afraid they'd kill me. They—was all longshoremen, you know. And they were drink—drunk all the time. And we were put in a big room just overnight and we were so frightened.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BENDER: And then we got on the ship.

LEVINE: What was it like, traveling? Well, you—let's see. How many of there were you? There was your mother.

BENDER: M—one brother was missing. There was eight of us.

LEVINE: Eight of you. So what was it like, traveling with your mother—

BENDER: It wasn't bad.

LEVINE: —and eight children?

BENDER: Well, it wasn't bad. It was on ship. We got on board; we played around. You know, it wasn't too bad.

LEVINE: Do you remember the ship's accommodations?

BENDER: N—very little.

LEVINE: And how about the voyage itself? Is there anything you remember about that?

BENDER: No. I remem—no, I don't, really. I know we played on be—on—on the deck.

LEVINE: What did you play? Do you remember?

BENDER: We—I've forgot. We jumped rope. I remember that. I forgot what we did. And my mother was sick all the way. She was so seasick and she stayed in the cabin. And I—now, I remember docking at the pier and my father had hired a—a boat and rowed out to the ship. We weren't going to dock until the next—that night, and we were waving to him. He came to meet us.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: I remember that.

LEVINE: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

BENDER: Oh, yes. We saw it. We all got on deck, everybody on the ship, and started waving at it.

LEVINE: Wow. And how about Ellis Island? What—

BENDER: I—I don't remem—I know it was a big, big place with tables and men sitting there with—and I saw them discharge people that weren't well, send them back. And I had a sister who had trouble with her eye, and my mother was so worried that they'd send her back but they let her come through. We were all so beautiful—you know, beautifully dressed. They thought, you know, we were very rich.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

BENDER: That's the only part I remember. And then I remember during the war that F—First War—or was it the Second? No, the First, that they exonerated Dreyfus and—and the Second World War, the Adriatic was bombed with the troops on it.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BENDER: I remember that. I said, "My God! That ship's still around?"

LEVINE: Wow.

BENDER: "I can't believe it."

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So when you—when you were—went through the processing at Ellis Island, then w—did your—was your father there on Ellis Island to take you—

BENDER: Yes, he came to take us.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And—and w—when you got off of Ellis Island, where did you go and how did you go?

BENDER: We went to a h—the apartment my father rented, a seven-room apartment. I remember.

LEVINE: In [unclear]?

BENDER: It was 107th Street between Madison and Fifth.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENDER: And it was beautiful then. We were near the park. But now, it's terrible.

LEVINE: And what do you remember? What struck you as—as different and—and when—when you—those first days and weeks when you were in this country?

BENDER: Well, the children playing in the streets. You never have that in Paris.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENDER: They have courtyards there. You know, the regular courtyard. And they play in there but they never play on the street.

LEVINE: Hmm. So—

BENDER: And the children—and I had a hard time getting to speak English. But you learn. When you're young, you learn fast—it—your mind is more at ease.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So w—did you go to school right away?

BENDER: Yes. They enrolled me in the school on—it's on the same street that we lived on, so I didn't have far to go.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was that like, going to school?

BENDER: Nice. I liked it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: I loved it.

LEVINE: How did it compare with the—

BENDER: It was different, entirely.

LEVINE: What—

BENDER: I was smarter for my age than the average child was here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: You—I don't know, they—wh—what it is but it—Eur—I find European children, like France and England, even the Asians have a higher education than we Americans. First of all, they—children, at six years old, get—go to school. There, it's five.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: And that's all I remember.

LEVINE: Did—were—were there any teachers that took a special interest in—in your learning English or anything like that?

BENDER: Yes. They were very nice and I learned it very fast.

LEVINE: What was the neighborhood like then? Can you describe that?

BENDER: Beautiful, beautiful. Very lovely families with Jewish—but very nice.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: And you were more neighborly. Everybody knew everybody on the street. It was like a little town. I live in—I lived in the building 40 years and I—sometimes, you don't know your neighbors. You greet 'em and that's it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: And the—that whole street, everybody knew each other—each other's business.

LEVINE: Did they socialize?

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: They get together?

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Were there any social clubs that were—

BENDER: No. Not that I know of.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: Oh, as I got older, there were clubs.

LEVINE: What were they like, in your experience?

BENDER: Well, they were—they were the kind of clubs that they used for political clubs.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

BENDER: Yeah.

LEVINE: What were the politics of the clubs that you, personally, had any connection with?

BENDER: Well, I was too young then to even remember. But I—the other day, I wanted to—I—I gave myself a—I wanted to see how much I remembered. And I named 15 presidents.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Good. [chuckles]

BENDER: Everyone—I couldn't believe it.

LEVINE: Good. Now, did—did your mother and father become citizens?

BENDER: Oh, yes. My father immediately, in those days, and my brothers never became citizens. They stayed French citizens.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. But you became a citizen—

BENDER: Oh, yes, on my father—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: And then when I got married, my husband was in the Army. So I was a citizen.

LEVINE: Was your husband born here?

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Okay. So let's see. Wait, we'll pause here. [tape off/on] Okay. So [clears throat] what did you—how long did you stay in school once you—

BENDER: I graduated.

LEVINE: You graduated.

BENDER: I—I went to the high—the high school one year and I got married very young, which was a terrible mistake. And—and then my husband committed—I was married about five years and my hus—and we had no children and he committed suicide.

LEVINE: Oh.

BENDER: Something happened and then I came back. I lived in Cali—went to California and then I came back to my mother's house and stayed there, and I met a man and I remarried.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: And he died of an—an—Alzheimer's—

LEVINE: Oh.

BENDER: —two years ago.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Well, now, did you ever work?

BENDER: No, but I went to work when he died and I loved it. But I—they retired me.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. I see. So—so maybe you could say something about the things that happened during your life, like the Depression. How did that affect you, personally?

BENDER: It didn't.

LEVINE: It didn't.

BENDER: No, it didn't at all.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: My husband was in the dress business and the banks had closed at that time, if you remember. And—and let's see, what happened? And, oh, I—[unclear] the president of the bank called up my husband, told him to take his money out because they were going to—so he had—he was lucky. So he didn't suffer anything. The only thing he suffered, he lost in the stock market. If you re—I don't—the market went way down and people were throwing themselves out of the window. I'll never forget. But it didn't bother me at all. I lived well.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: You know? I had a good life and wasn't bad. There were a lot of calamities. There were heartbreaks in my life. I lost a son, who was 21 years old, and he got spinal meningitis. But the doctor said he'd never, never be able to function, that he would be just a vegetable, so maybe it was better.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. You just had one child?

BENDER: I have a daughter—

LEVINE: Oh, you have—

BENDER: —who's married.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: She's a grandmother to this baby.

LEVINE: Oh, wow. Uh-huh.

BENDER: And I have a wonderful son-in-law—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: —and very successful.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: And he's an oral surgeon and very bright. He had a—won a scholarship at Harvard, a full scholarship. He was a—a—he went to school with John—Jack Kennedy.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: They knew each other and he's very bright.

LEVINE: Well, when you think back about coming to this country and, you know, starting a whole different life here, do you think that immigration experience made a difference in the kind of person—

BENDER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: What—what influence do you think it might have had on you?

BENDER: Well, [chuckles] I can't put my finger on it but you become very independent, for one thing. I can't tell you but I—just as I say, I don't—and I don't remember anymore.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Well, you remember a lot so whatever you do remember—

BENDER: I had a lot of friends. I know I made many friends but I was a—I used to feel sorry for my mother, so I—I couldn't go out and play after school. I'd go home, go—go a—and I used to go to the store for my mother to save her. And I used to help her in the house and I helped her when she was cooking. I became another mother. I was a mother of n—of eight. You know—

LEVINE: You were the child who—who became the mother—

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: —rather than your sisters.

BENDER: That's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, now, could you describe the apartment? Did you have electricity?

BENDER: Oh, yes. We had all—all modern—we had everything. We had beautiful apartment. And the only thing is, we had to walk up five floors, and I should try saving my mother from carrying packages. I'll never forget. I used to meet her so she—and help bring up the packages. I was a wonderful daughter.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: I'll say that for myself.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BENDER: When I think back.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Do you think you raised your children in some of the same ways that your mother and father raised you?

BENDER: You can't. Not in this—you just can't in this generation.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

BENDER: You just can't.

LEVINE: What's different—

BENDER: You th—

LEVINE: —now that you can't?

BENDER: Well, you don't put the burden on them like your parents did. You let them—you give them too much. You let them go of their free will. I didn't go to private school. I didn't go to camp. I didn't go to college and I didn't have an allowance. That's the difference.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. It's a big difference.

BENDER: Yeah. You know, and she was born with a gold spoon in her mouth. I—you know, it's different. Much different. It's only one child, or two children. But we were nine and my father had to work two jobs.

LEVINE: What did he do in this country?

BENDER: He had a paint store and he used to get—the painters would come in and it was like a—an agency. They'd come in to get work for different apartments and he'd find 'em work. And besides his paint store, he'd made this other money and he worked very late. And it—when I think how late—how hard he worked, but he was a wonderful father.

LEVINE: Do you think both your mother and father were happy they had come here?

BENDER: Oh, yes. Very much so. Because her whole family came here, were here before she was.

LEVINE: Oh. Oh, I see.

BENDER: Not my father's but my mother's.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: They stayed in France. My grandmother died during the First World War. And my uncles did the same. They were—they never—couldn't fight in the war. They were too old. But my brothers did.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: I'm so sorry I—I didn't bring a Medal of Honor that they—that was awarded to him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So your brothers kept their French citizenship.

BENDER: Yes.

LEVINE: And they—and they fought in the First World War.

BENDER: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What would you say is the highlight of your life? What do you feel very satisfied about from your lifetime?

BENDER: It's hard to say whether, giving birth to my child or the—m—my marriage, which ended tragically. I don't know what to say.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

BENDER: I took it all in stride.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BENDER: I—I mean, I didn't—I can't re—I can't—I don't know what to say but I took every—sorrow and—and I—and—and tragedy, I took it all in stride. There were a lot of heartbreaks and there were good days, and I made the best of it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: I tried to live it—live it up.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. [clears throat]

BENDER: The saddest thing was when I had to bury my—my family. There was nobody there to bury them.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BENDER: And this one, my—the—my youngest sister, it almost killed me.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BENDER: I think that's why I fell. I knew she was dead and I had to go to bury her. And I and—I fell that very day—

LEVINE: Really?

BENDER: —and nearly died.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BENDER: I broke every bone in my body and lay there all night unconscious until the girl found me. I was on the floor.

LEVINE: Oh, that's terrible.

BENDER: And I was in the hos—they brought me to the hospital. Then I came here.

LEVINE: Is there anyone else alive from your sisters and brothers?

BENDER: They're all gone.

LEVINE: [sentence unclear]. Uh-huh. Uh-hmm. Hmm. Do—have you visited Ellis Island or the Statue of Liberty?

BENDER: Oh, I would loved—you know, when they were make—fixing it—

LEVINE: Yeah.

BENDER: —I was dying to go but I didn't want to go alone. I always wanted to go back there and see what it was like.

LEVINE: Well, maybe they'll organize a trip from this—

BENDER: I'd like it.

LEVINE: —this place. They do that sometimes.

BENDER: I would go. Yeah. [unclear].

LEVINE: Then you can show where your tape is.

BENDER: Yeah, all right.

LEVINE: And—

BENDER: Wonderful.

LEVINE: —show you around.

BENDER: I hope I—I hope to but—

LEVINE: Yes, you did. Is there anything else you can think of that you'd like to say before we close about your life or your philosophy or anything that—

BENDER: Well, all I could say, God was good to me. He let me live this long. I could have gone, you know, died last year but I—I'm here. I'm thankful and I have the love of my friend—ah, friends, no friends. But I've made a lot of good friends and—

LEVINE: How is it here in the—in—

BENDER: Well, they've been wonderful.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BENDER: I was—felt so frightened to be here. You know, three years ago, I broke my hip and I went to the Jewish Home and Hospital. And when the nurse told me she was sending me here and it was Catholic, I went into a spin. And they were so wonderful. You have no idea.

LEVINE: That's great. That's great.

BENDER: I—they couldn't have been nicer, every one of them. I was afraid to tell them I was Jewish but then I—you know, and then I—I—I said to myself, 'What for? Why should I be afraid?' I was afraid all my life of telling people I'm—I'm Jewish. And I did and the nuns couldn't be nicer.

LEVINE: Oh, that's wonderful. Well, I'm very happy to have had the—

BENDER: Oh, thank you.

LEVINE: —[unclear] to speak with you.

BENDER: I hope I get—I hope it made sense.

LEVINE: It certainly did. And I want to thank you. I've been speaking with Rose Bender and it's n—September 24th, 1997. We're here at the M—Mary Manning Walsh Home in Manhattan and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]