EI-957
ALICE GELFAND
BIRTHDATE: OCTOBER 19, 1913
INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 29, 1997
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 83
RUNNING TIME:
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

POLAND, 1921
AGE: 7

SHIP: KROHNLAND [PH]
PORT: ANTWERP
RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is September 29th, 1997. I'm here at Waterside in New York City with Al—Alice Gelfand, who came from Poland in 1921 when she was just about seven.

GELFAND: Yeah, you could say that.

LEVINE: Okay. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I would like to start at the beginning. If you would say your birth date and where in Poland you were born.

GELFAND: My name is Alice Gelfand. My age is—I was born in 1913 and—

LEVINE: The date?

GELFAND: The date wa—my birth date is October 19th, 1913.

LEVINE: And where in Poland were you?

GELFAND: It was a suburb of Shedlitz [PH] called Morrity [PH].

LEVINE: And did you live in Morrity up until the time you left?

GELFAND: I was born there.

LEVINE: And you—

GELFAND: And lived there.

LEVINE: —stayed there. Uh-huh. When you think back to Morrity, Poland, what are the memories that you have of that little town?

GELFAND: Very few memories. I remembered a certain street that we lived on and there was a—a brook, I think, or a small lake. And they had swans swimming there and there were fish in—in this lake or whatever it was. And my mother would take me there and we'd sit there. It was like a park. And I would feed the—the swans. That I remember. And I remember some of the shops that my mother took me shopping to. There was a shopping area there.

LEVINE: What were the shops that you—

GELFAND: Well, there was a butcher shop, a grocer, a—a little hardware store. You know, little stores like that. And that's about all I remember. And I also remember coming here.

LEVINE: Well, before we get to that part, did you go to school at all?

GELFAND: No.

LEVINE: No.

GELFAND: The Polish people would not allow Jews to go to school. I used to walk my little friends—what does a young child know? I grew up with these little Polish girls on my street. And they would go to school in the morning and I would walk with them. And the teacher would not let me come in. I came home and cried. I said, "Well, my friends are going to school. Why can't I go?" And so she told me that in—"You can't go to school if you're Jewish. You can't go to school in Poland." In this particular town, that's how anti-Semitic they were.

LEVINE: Were there other examples of anti-Semitism in—

GELFAND: Yes, there were a lot of pogroms there that I remember but I didn't know. My mother was—didn't want to tell me as much where they—a

gang would get a hold of a Jewish boy, take him into the center of town. And we faced that street from our windows. And they would beat him. I don't know whether he lived or died. I—I don't know.

LEVINE: Did you actually see that?

GELFAND: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow.

GELFAND: Yeah. So that's another thing I remember. And I also had a little brother who was like, when I was there he was about eight months old. When we came here he was 11 months old. That was it.

LEVINE: Was your family religious in Poland?

GELFAND: Yes.

LEVINE: Do you—

GELFAND: They were orthodox.

LEVINE: —remember any observances there—

GELFAND: Yes.

LEVINE: —from when you were a little girl?

GELFAND: Well, my grandfather left about three years earlier to go to Amer—to America. He had a brother here that took him over and also, with an uncle of mine. My grandfather took his oldest son and went with him. And so my grandmother was left alone and my parents moved in with her. And she had a young boy, abou—a teenager. So we lived together. My father used to go to synagogue and he worked. His father had a men's clothing shop where he—they made clothes in those days. Everything was made to order. And all—they had six sons and all the six sons worked. It was a house and the shop was in the front and their—their dwelling was in the rear. And I remember that. My father's mother had a cow and chickens running around. And every time she made butter, churned butter, I used to go across the street. You know, we lived across from them. And she would give me a big piece of pumpernickel bread. I remember that and that was a treat with fresh-churned butter. And other than that, you know, sometimes when my mother used to talk it brought back memories. I remembered little things.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

GELFAND: But—

LEVINE: What was your mother's name?

GELFAND: Her name was Rifkeliebe [PH], her Yiddish name.

LEVINE: Okay.

GELFAND: Yeah.

LEVINE: And what about your father? What was his—

GELFAND: My father was Hastel [PH].

LEVINE: Okay.

GELFAND: Yeah.

LEVINE: And did your father come here first?

GELFAND: No, then my grandfather—tell you another story. [chuckles] My grandfather sent a trunk full of clothes and tickets for us to come here. And—and he came—he came with the tickets and sent out a trunk full of clothing. He came by ship, of course, at that time and so that we'll have nice clothes to come to America. This was for my grandmother, for his youngest son and for our family, my mother's family. And then we were out somewhere. I don't know where; I don't remember. And they came and ransacked our house, our apartment and took everything, plus my mother left her two little diamond rings she had on the dresser. They took this trunk full of clothes. They knew—they knew the American is coming, the rich American. My grandfather lived there all of his life so they knew him. And you know what they did? They wanted to kill my grandfather. So my father and someone, a friend of his or maybe one of his brothers (I don't recall) in the middle of the night took a wagon full of hay and hid my grandfather under the hay and took him to his sister's house, who lived in Shedlitz where we stopped that time. I didn't finish telling you the story with—

LEVINE: Yeah.

GELFAND: —my father with the tickets. And—and he got him to his sister's house. They would have killed him. And this was during the—you know, the middle of the night. And then he went on to Antwerp and he went

home and left the tickets with my father for us to come. We were supposed to come a few weeks later. So that was the saga with him.

LEVINE: Do you want to tell the story about going from Morrity to—

GELFAND: Yes. Now, we went to Shedlitz on our way to go into Antwerp, Belgium to say goodbye to our relatives. And then the next morning we went on to Belgium by train. Well, we got there. That—the following morning we were supposed to go to pick up the ship. My grandfather had us booked on a lovely liner, a very, you know, new liner that was going in those days. That, I don't remember which one it was. And the—that morning my father forgot. He left the tickets at my aunt's table. When he got undressed he took his—you know, wherever he had it, in his jacket, I don't know. He put it on the table with his watch and everything on the table. And he forgot to pick up the tickets. And we went on to Antwerp. We get there. He looks for his tickets. He hasn't got the tickets. He realized what he did. He had to go back by train. You know, it's like an overnight trip. It's very far, and in those days—and he picked up the tickets. By the time he got back to Belgium, our ship left. So we had to take this Krohnland [PH]—Krohnland and—and there we had the worst accommodations. We were down on the lowest deck. My mother, my grandmother and I were deathly ill, and my little brother. And—and my father and my uncle, they were—they felt good. My uncle would go up to the first deck, the top deck, and bring down food for us. But we couldn't eat. We were sick for three weeks on that ship. When we got off the ship my mother said she thought she was going to die from malnutrition, from—from retching. And we were all sick, my grandmother too. So therefore, we came to Ellis Island and it was Shabbat. We were supposed to get off Friday and my grandfather should pick us up at night. He couldn't—he didn't ride, didn't ride Shabbat. So—and none of them did. So we had to wait till Saturday night for him to be able to pick us up and take us home. And we lived in Manhattan on 102—on 99th Street. They lived on 99th Street and he furnished the whole apartment with new furniture and everything. And they had a—a two-bedroom. And my mother—was four people, you know, the two children and she and my father. And they were two people so we were six in four rooms. But we managed.

LEVINE: Tell me whatever you can remember about Ellis Island.

GELFAND: I remember very little. I remember getting off the boat. Maybe I was half asleep. I was a little girl. I was knocked out. I was tired. And I remember my mother laid me down on the bench. She put one of the bundles that she was carrying—you know how they carried these little bundles tied up in sheets or whatever it was. And she put it down on the bench and—and I fell asleep. And I remember at night they served

us chicken. I—I don't know wh—what kind, or soup. We had a regular nice dinner. And they did have—they did provide kosher food for the people that were—yes, that were kosher. And—and then I don't remember anything else. When I went back, when they opened up Ellis Island again—not before—it was before they rebuilt it—

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

GELFAND: I went with my husband and I said, "Oh, my God. I recognize this and this." You know, the benches that were there and—and the white-tiled kitchen or the examining room, whatever it was.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the examinations?

GELFAND: No, I don't.

LEVINE: W—did you sleep in the dormitory or did you just sleep on the bench?

GELFAND: I don't know. At that time, I slept on the bench. Otherwise, I don't know where we slept. We probably all couldn't sleep on the benches. They probably had, for those that were staying over, you know—many people, they sent back and they had to have a place for lodging for that time. Right?

LEVINE: Right.

GELFAND: So that—

LEVINE: So what was—what—

GELFAND: —the saga.

LEVINE: What was it like when your grandfather showed up?

GELFAND: Oh, we were so happy. You mean to—to pick us up here. Of course, he came with my aunt and—and his son, my uncle, because that was the son that came back with him. He was 18 years old at the time. And he got married here and had children. And we all lived near—one house next to the other.

LEVINE: Now, you were on the East Side or the West Side?

GELFAND: The East. We were between Second and Third Avenue and 100—99th. And then when my father got a job and—and brought home a little money and, because my mother lived with her parents, so she saved

up a few hundred dollars and we moved to 102nd Street between Second and Third.

LEVINE: What was that neighborhood like at that time?

GELFAND: It was very nice. It was Jewish, Irish, Italian. A few Spaniards were there, Spanish people. And it was very nice. It w—everybody was friendly. All the neighbors were friendly. There was no prejudice shown like today. It's terrible.

LEVINE: Well, that's called Spanish Harlem, right?

GELFAND: Now it's Spanish Harlem. Yeah.

LEVINE: Then I guess that's because of Spanish people.

GELFAND: My aunts—yeah. My aunts and uncles all lived around there. My father had a tailor shop there on 100—

LEVINE: Was he himself a tailor? I mean, did he [unclear] a tailor?

GELFAND: Yes, he worked for—yes, yes. He opened a tailor shop with cleaning and tailoring.

LEVINE: Where was that?

GELFAND: On 103rd Street and Second Avenue. And my uncles and cousins lived on 103rd between Second and First Avenue. You know, the families were always together. They lived near one another. No one knew from cars. I remember horses and wagons, you know.

LEVINE: What are some the things that, if you can recall, struck you as new and different, like those first few weeks or months, about this country?

GELFAND: I—I—I don't remember that. No. You know how children are? I—I assimilated with all the kids on the block and I went to school. Of course, I didn't know how to speak English, only Polish and Yiddish. So my aunt would practice with me at night. She did. She was a wonderful aunt. She was like a second mother to us. And—and then after six months, I—I spoke English fluently. And I dropped the Polish because my parents spoke Yiddish. In Poland, they spoke Polish, you know, with everyone else. They grew up there, but no schooling. My father had the teaching in Hebrew and—and Yiddish. Only the boys went to Hebrew school, to cheder [PH] to school. Not the women. And so my mother had no schooling. And all her years she fought it and she felt so badly about it. It was one of the things that really tortured

her terribly. And of course, why, when how grew up—and then she had twins here in America. She had two boys. And then, speaking—while we were speaking in English to her, she learned. She spoke English very well, my mother, but did not read. My father taught himself from the Yiddish—with the Yiddish alphabet he would recognize words in the paper. You know, he'd recognize the—the large print and translate it into English. So he knew English. He spoke it very well, my father. My mother spoke with an accent. But—and they tor—were tortured here too in those days. It was very bad when they came over, not speaking the language, not knowing anything. It was very hard on them.

LEVINE: Tell me about your mother and father. Did they—were they born in Poland near where you were born?

GELFAND: Yes, they were born in that—

LEVINE: So they—

GELFAND: —same town. They lived there all their lives. The gran—my grandparents were not born there.

LEVINE: Where were they coming from?

GELFAND: One was born in—in Warsaw, my grandfather, and lived there for many years as a young boy. And my grandmother, I don't—I don't remember the town—also in Poland somewhere in a small—a little, small town.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GELFAND: They came from small towns.

LEVINE: And then when they came here, d—was it their idea that—that you and they should become Americans?

GELFAND: Oh, my mother said she would never go back. I have my American—you see, I couldn't become a citizen on my father's papers at that time and neither was my mother able to. At that time, the law was different. So when I—and I went along. Wait, I was on my—yes, we were on my father's papers, my brother and I.

LEVINE: Well, did you [unclear]—

GELFAND: The other brothers—the other brothers were born here.

LEVINE: Well, now, w—did your father go to night school? How—did he go to classes—

GELFAND: No, he had no time.

LEVINE: —to become a citizen.

GELFAND: He had—then he started learning. I don't know if he went to night school. After being here five years—

LEVINE: He became a citizen.

GELFAND: Yes, he—and the two children were on his—

LEVINE: You—your brother—

GELFAND: Yeah, on his papers. We didn't have separate. That was it.

LEVINE: Right.

GELFAND: When we grew up—w—I was married a number of years—we went back. We—we took a—a—a trip abroad at separate times, my brother and I. So we went to get our own citizenship papers and I have my own now and he does.

LEVINE: Oh.

GELFAND: We—because we had to present my father's papers all the time wherever we went.

LEVINE: So what? You went back and got your birth certificate?

GELFAND: Yes.

LEVINE: And—and then you continued—

GELFAND: Now, I didn't get a birth certificate. When I was 10 years old and I knew how to write letters, I wrote to my uncles. My father's family were all killed. There was a hundred people in his family, close, nieces and nephews. They were eight children. And all of the eight children had children. And they were—an—and the children had children. There were great nieces and nephews. Everyone was wiped out in that town immediately, because we know someone that came here from that town. I don't know if they hid out in the woods in—in graves. They dug tun—tunnels. Don't ask what they were. You know. And so they survived and they snuck out and they walked for hundreds of miles and

for days and days and days and weeks until they got out of there. And somehow, they wound up in China. Yeah, in China. And that's where they were during the whole duration of the war and then they came here. So they told us what happened. The whole town was wiped out. So my f—I wrote my uncle when—before the war (I was 10 years old) to please go to the hall of records. They had—I remember there was a hall of records there. Don't ask me where it was but I remember. [coughs] And get my birth certificate. I needed it for school. I had nothing to show but the passport.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GELFAND: It—is to get into school, I had to show my birth—so I showed—that was my reference, my passport. And so I wanted my birth certificate for everything else, for other reasons. And he said, "The whole hall of records burned down. There's not a record of anyone," even in—in their own town. You see? And they never tried to get out of that little town. They never did. See, my aunt got married, my fa—grandfather's sister and they moved—she married a man from that big city, from Shedlitz. This was a—a suburb. It—it—God knows how big the suburb was, you know. You walked around the block; it was the suburb.

LEVINE: Right.

GELFAND: And—and they got out and their children were educated there. They went to—to high school. My cousins came here. They were high school graduates. They went on to college here.

LEVINE: Did you communicate by letter with them—

GELFAND: Yes.

LEVINE: —up until the time they—

GELFAND: Yeah, we used to. Yeah, my uncle came over too at another time and he comm—I used to write the letters for him. He wrote in Yiddish and I wrote to my cousins in English.

LEVINE: Well, now, what was it like for you? You were the oldest child.

GELFAND: Yes.

LEVINE: And you probably learned English faster than your mother and father.

GELFAND: In six months, my—my family told me—people, kinsman that came to my parents' home, they couldn't believe it. He says, "Not even with an accent." And children do learn very quickly.

LEVINE: So did—were you kind of the spokesperson for your mother—

GELFAND: All the time, and grandmother and grandfather. I had to write letters for them. Wherever they had to go, I went with them. My grandfather spoke a little English. He was only here a few years. And this is the way it was. And my mother said she would never go back. If they gave her a million dollars, she wouldn't go to live there again.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GELFAND: No matter how they struggled here, yet, they had their freedom and freedom means a lot. You know that. And it meant a lot to them.

LEVINE: So what was school like for you?

GELFAND: Well, at the begin—

LEVINE: This was your first time—

GELFAND: Yes. And I went to school in Manhattan and I pa—still passed the school but it's not a public school anymore. It's some kind of a technical school.

LEVINE: What was it?

GELFAND: It was—I don't remember what it is now. It was a—a public school, P.S. 150 on 96th Street between First and Second. And my mother used to walk me to school every day. We lived on 99th.

LEVINE: Were there a lot of children, immigrant children in school at that time?

GELFAND: Yes, yeah. There were.

LEVINE: And how about—they were coming from all different places—

GELFAND: There—there was—a lot of immigrants at that time were living in our area.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you get special consideration in some—

GELFAND: I really don't remember. I remember getting homework and I didn't know what it is. I had older cousins and they showed me, and they

explained it to me and showed me how to do it. You know, you go into school. And I was already behind a year, don't forget. U—usually, you start school at six. I started at seven.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GELFAND: And that was the whole thing.

LEVINE: So then what? You stayed in school. How long did you stay in?

GELFAND: Well, I stayed in that school until the sixth grade, I think. And then when we m—in those days, wherever you moved you transferred to a school. The school was in the area. And the school happened to be across the street from where we lived.

LEVINE: Where did you move to?

GELFAND: We moved to 102nd Street. So we went to that school. I did. My brother was a little baby. And then my brother went to that school when he was six years old. And then I went on to P.S. 99, which was a junior high school. And I graduated from there. It was a brand new school. We—I went in the first group of students.

LEVINE: Which—where was that?

GELFAND: That was on [telephone rings] First Avenue.

LEVINE: We'll pause here. [tape off/on] Okay, we're resuming here after the phone rang. You were saying that the junior high was located—where was it?

GELFAND: On 99th Street but over near the river.

LEVINE: The East River.

GELFAND: On First Avenue. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GELFAND: Yeah. And that's still in existence.

LEVINE: And so you—after that—

GELFAND: So when I pass 96th Street with the car to go to visit my husband (we go through the park there) and we pass this, I [chuckles] always say, "I went to this school." And the library was on 96th Street. So you went

from school—my mother would meet me and take me to the library. And my mother was a wonderful person.

LEVINE: Yeah, tell me about her.

GELFAND: You know, she—

LEVINE: What she was like.

GELFAND: She had my brother, who was in a carriage still. She would take me to the museum and walk on Shabbat because she wouldn't take bus—you know, the streetcars, and stayed with us in the museum and take us through. Wherever we wanted to go, I was the leader and I wanted to see certain things. My mother did that with us, took us to the library.

LEVINE: What was the library? How—what role did that play in your life?

GELFAND: Well, I took home books to read. I read a lot. And my little brother wanted the books so he used to mess up the pages and I had to pay fines. And I would want to hit him and my father said, "Pay the nickel or three cents. Don't hit him. He won't do it again. You'll hide them. You won't give it to him." [laughs]

LEVINE: What—can you think of any attitudes that your mother and father had, other things that they tried to instill in you or ways they tried to bring you up or—

GELFAND: No, they—

LEVINE: —like that?

GELFAND: They wanted to become Americanized, my par—my mother was 28 years old when she came here. She was a young girl and she had us two little kids. She—one died. She had three in Europe. The kid had some kind of a sickness. There wasn't even a doctor in town. The—the pharmacist was like the doctor. Anything was wrong, you went to the pharmacist. He prescribed medication. He took something out of your eye. He looked in your ear. He knew everything. The doctors were where my aunts and cousins live in Shedlitz. That was a very big city. So if you had to go to Shedlitz you had to travel for hours by train. And if a child had fever, you know—so she had a lot of problems. But when she came here my parents were very happy to be here. They really joined in everything. They joined the society. And in those days, they had banquets and balls where they used to go dancing. Y—

LEVINE: What was the name of the society?

GELFAND: The Shedlitze [PH] Society. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And that—and a lot of—where was it located here in Manhattan?

GELFAND: They—in Manhattan somewhere. It—I don't even remember. Somewhere in Manhattan. And then they had a cemetery from the society. They paid that out. And they're all buried there. Our whole family's buried in—in Baron Hirsch [PH] Cemetery.

LEVINE: Wow. Well—

GELFAND: Staten Island.

LEVINE: Will you also be buried there?

GELFAND: No.

LEVINE: You—

GELFAND: I refuse to be buried there. [chuckles]

LEVINE: But—

GELFAND: I bought a—a plat with my kids.

LEVINE: But the Shedlitz Society, anything else you can remember about that?

GELFAND: And all the people that were there were from Shedlitz.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

GELFAND: So they were landsleit, you know, kinsmen. And they were all friends and they knew each other from the Old Country. And it was very nice. And they used to come to our house. These were all old friends that they grew up with from the town. One of my mother's friends is still alive and I keep up with her. I take her out to lunch very often. She lives in Rigo [PH] Park. And my mother kept up with her. But my mother was, like, 10 years older than her. She's 90, this woman.

LEVINE: Gee, maybe I'll see if she wants to be interviewed.

GELFAND: I don't know.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Anyway—

GELFAND: She remembers a lot of things from Europe. She would tell you stories. I hear from her a lot of stories but—that I don't even know the people.

LEVINE: Well, it would be nice to have [unclear].

GELFAND: But I don't know if she would want to. I would ask her daughter if she'd want to do that.

LEVINE: Okay. We're—we're—

GELFAND: You know, if her mother would want to do that.

LEVINE: Tell me about the pharmacist in this country. Di—was there a role, a big role for the pharmacists here?

GELFAND: It was the same thing. Yes, the same thing in those days. And then it got—but if he saw something serious happened—he would take something out of your eye, he did. And you'd go in with something, he'd tell you what to do, what to put on. You had a—an infection. Yeah. But then there was a law that, you know, they couldn't do anything for the people. They had to send them to a doctor. And this is the way it started.

LEVINE: But the pharmacist was considered kind of a wisdom figure in the community.

GELFAND: Right, right.

LEVINE: Is that right?

GELFAND: That's true. That's true.

LEVINE: And I guess that's a direct carryover from where there were no doctors and—

GELFAND: Right, right.

LEVINE: Interesting.

GELFAND: Yeah.

LEVINE: Anything else you can think of about the community in the—in where you were?

GELFAND: The—

LEVINE: Uptown, the East Side?

GELFAND: The only—yeah, the—what I do remember is when my father came here he got a job through one of his kinsmen in a shop doing tailoring. You know, he—in the men's—you know, men's factory where they made suits. And my father used to do—you know, it was like piecework. He did the finishing. Someone else did something else, you know. And I remember he was telling us—you know, not that I remember—that in those days he didn't have a nickel for fare. It was a nickel. And he worked somewhere around Columbus Circle. And he walked from 99th Street to the east—the Second Avenue, 99th Street, all the way over to 59th Street, the West Side. Could you imagine that? For a nickel. And—and at night, because he was tired, he used the nickel to—to come back home. And today—there was no welfare. There was nothing. You couldn't—if you didn't do it on your own, what—you were starving. And my mother used to help out in a store selling for a Jewish owner, you know. And everybody spoke Yiddish. All the Jewish people spoke. So she had no problem. She used to count. My mother used to count very well. She handled money very well. And she—so she worked part time. And—

LEVINE: In the neighborhood—

GELFAND: In the neighborhood, sure. And my father tells these stories. And I think of today, people come here. They're immigrants. Immediately, they know where to go. They go for welfare. They get medical assistance. They get everything. In those days, you couldn't get a—a dime from anyone. So you did it on your own.

LEVINE: Hmm.

GELFAND: And they sure did it on their own and they had pride, a lot of pride. And my mother used to invite people for dinners and made—from a little nothing, she'd make a big meal. Always on Sunday, we had company. And this is the way it was. They—they still lived the way they lived in Europe for a number of years and then till they became Americanized. But my mother was happy to be here, my father too. They were happy.

LEVINE: Did you—

GELFAND: And my grandmother died at—she was 97. And my grandfather was 84 and my mother was 99.

LEVINE: Good stock.

GELFAND: Yeah. They—they lived a good clean life.

LEVINE: Yeah.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: Your father ever say anything about the garment industry where he was working?

GELFAND: He liked it. He liked working there and he met a lot of people. And he—he worked there until he retired, for different people. And, you know, during the Depression it was very bad here.

LEVINE: Yeah. Tell me how the Depression affected you—

GELFAND: Oh, it affected all of us very badly. But we didn't go on welfare. My husband, if he made $6 a day, it was fine. We got along. And the same with my father. It was season work. So you know what my father used to do? If he couldn't make it in the shop he did—couldn't earn very much—he worked Saturday and Sunday in the—in the men's clothing store and did the alterations. And he did that for years. And then he saved up enough money and bought a little tailor shop from someone. And he had that for many years. And then he really made a nice living.

LEVINE: Where was that?

GELFAND: All in Harlem.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GELFAND: All in a—one—103rd and we lived on 102nd. The same area code; it was between Second and Third. And his store was on Second. So it—it w—everything was that togetherness, you know. My mother would bring him lunch everyday. And he worked five days—in the store, he worked six days a week and Sunday, for holidays especially, they called him into the shop. And then when he retired, he worked there Saturday and Sunday. Even during the week, he worked a day or two.

LEVINE: Did he become less religious in this country because of needing to work on—

GELFAND: Yeah, because when you have to work on the Shabbat—

LEVINE: Right.

GELFAND: —then you're a hypocrite, you know. Oh, it was [unclear] at home. My mother was very religious. She kept—everything was orthodox with her. But my father couldn't go to temple. He only went when he was off on Saturdays. If he was working he didn't go.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GELFAND: He had to make a living.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you think—

GELFAND: And by that time—

LEVINE: —that bothered him?

GELFAND: By that time, she had the twins here, you see? And it bothered him but my grandfather went to shul every day. Every day, he went to shul. The shul was also across the street from us. And we always lived together in the same area.

LEVINE: Hmm, wow. So how long did you stay in school then?

GELFAND: I stayed until junior high school. I graduated. Then I went on to business school.

LEVINE: Oh.

GELFAND: Because in those days, you di—girls didn't go to college. They couldn't afford it, even as little as it was. And—and I went to business school for a while. And in the meantime, I was seeing my husband. You know, I was married at 16 so that was the end of school. Today, you could continue school, right? In those days, finished. He said, "You don't have to worry. You don't have to work." And I didn't. He—he was a businessman. And he was good.

LEVINE: How did you meet your husband?

GELFAND: We lived in the same building. We were a group of kids, you know, boys and girls. We'd go to Coney Island together, a whole gang of kids and—and good kids. All of them, the fellows went on to college. They became professional men. And they all married the girls from the area.

LEVINE: Was your husband's family or he, himself, from Poland?

GELFAND: No, he lived here. He was born here but three of his sisters—wait. Two of—three children were born here, including him. One sister was born in Europe. They came from the Ukraine.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

GELFAND: His parents. Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh.

GELFAND: And his sisters used to work. They graduated high school and went to work for four—four cents an hour or something. I don't know, some ridiculous—like $4 a week, they earned, 4 or $5 a week.

LEVINE: Wow. So you were married during the Depression. You—

GELFAND: Just about.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GELFAND: And then everything started going down. It was very bad.

LEVINE: What—can you say anything more about, like, that group of kids that hung around together who—what you did?

GELFAND: You mean here in America?

LEVINE: Yeah.

GELFAND: We—we used to go together. We'd go to the movies, the girls with the girls, the boys with the boys. But in the street you'd sit on the stoop or on the sidewalk near your building and have boxes from the fruit store, which was downstairs, right. And we'd sit. We'd sing songs. It wasn't like today. The kids to—there was no malice within the kids of those years. They were all wonderful children, all good kids. Nobody did things like they do today.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GELFAND: It was a—you know, you raised your children and then my—my generation—my children, the next generation were raised the same way. My kids grew up to be wonderful kids. There—there was no drugs. They didn't know from drugs. My kids never smoked. My children used—I—I—I had a curfew for them to come home a certain

time in the evening. They had to be upstairs to do their homework. And I would know where they went.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GELFAND: They just didn't walk off without telling me, even as teenagers, how they snuck away. I used to say to my son—I had one son and four daughters—and he was in the middle and I would say, "Mel, do you ever smoke like I see the kids smoke behind the steps?" I smelled smoke when I walked down the steps. He says, "Ma, I tell you the truth. I once tried it and I was coughing and choking. I'll never smoke again." He said, "So don't worry about it," and he never did.

LEVINE: Oh.

GELFAND: [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GELFAND: I says, "I want you to tell me the truth and do it in front of me, not behind my back." And my kids grew up to be wonderful kids and their kids grew up to be wonderful kids.

LEVINE: Were you treated differently as a girl—

GELFAND: Yes.

LEVINE: —compared with your brothers? Could you talk about that?

GELFAND: I was spoiled. I was really spoiled. If I wanted something, come hell or high heaven, I got it. And if my mother didn't give it to me or my father, my grandmother gave it to me. I was her oldest grandchild. I was named for her mother and I was her angel. She adored me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How about as far as opportunities? Education, whatever. Were you—w—was the girl—the girl was more—

GELFAND: No, at that time, the girls went to high school. Yes.

LEVINE: Oh.

GELFAND: But they didn't go to college.

LEVINE: Hmm.

GELFAND: None of my friends went to college. But my children's friends and my children all went to college and their children. I have 10 grandchildren. They're all college graduates.

LEVINE: But the boys would go to college in y—at your age—

GELFAND: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: In your generation?

GELFAND: Yes, yes, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GELFAND: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GELFAND: Yeah. My husband had—had friends that were doctors and lawyers even in those days.

LEVINE: And why don't you say your husband's name for the tape?

GELFAND: Julie [PH] Gelfand.

LEVINE: And your children's names?

GELFAND: It's—

LEVINE: Maybe in the order—

GELFAND: It's Elaine. In the order, she's the first. Rita, Melvin, Rochelle and Linda.

LEVINE: And when you look back on it now of coming to this country as a little girl and starting again, do you think that immigrant experience—experience of immigration had an impact on you, on your personality, on the way you are in any ways?

GELFAND: No. The way I am is—through my parents, I'm that way. The way I was brought up, you see. But that—that incident had noth—you know, children forget. However, I went back to Europe in 1969, my husband and I and two of our friends, two couples. And I could have crossed the border with a visa into Poland. I had no intention of doing that. No way. I had—I have—don't want any part of Poland. And I went through Germany. We drove through Germany, parts of Germany and

we had to stop off to see, because when we got there we picked up a car that was supposed to be there at six in the morning and wasn't there in Frankfurt to take us to the Netherlands. And the car never ca—it was coming from Copenhagen to Frankfurt and it came hours and hours later. So we had to stay over in Germany. Otherwise, we would have passed Germany.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GELFAND: So we had to stay in Munich. We—you know, we went from Frankfurt to Munich. And that was the year that they killed the Israelis, that they murdered them, if you remember. They had the Olympics there. So the Olympic Village was still built up. It was gorgeous the way they—it was like a world's fair here that we had. And we admired it and we were driving and driving. And I said, "We're driving now on—on our people's blood. They're buried in these massive graves and we're driving on it. I will not stay here." Then we passed Dachau and my—one of my friend's husband said, "Would you want to stop here?" And we all said, "Nothing doing. Just keep driving and get out of Germany." And that's what we did.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

GELFAND: And we went through France. We went through the belly of France and—and we saw so much on our own. We went to Normandy. I—I can't even tell you the places we went. All—it all had to do—we wanted to see the sights where we were during the war and, you know—and we did that. We did so much of that. And we had a wonderful vacation but I wanted to get out of Germany. And never would I go to Poland. Never.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. What do you—what do you feel very satisfied about or—or feel proud of i—in your lifetime?

GELFAND: Well, I feel proud that I raised a wonderful family and my children never had to struggle. My husband worked very hard to support them in their style. And they were good kids. They were not spoiled and they adore me. My kids, they adore me. You know that they call me in the morning. They call me in the evening. "Where were you, Ma?" "I was playing cards." [chuckles] I play Canasta in the building once a week, or I go down to bingo. I says, "Don't you know by now that I go to bingo Monday night?" [laughter] And—and they look after me. They look out for me. They're wonderful kids.

LEVINE: That's great.

GELFAND: And I'm happy. It's just that my husband is sick and not—it's a year—In November will be a year that we're separated and it's a very lonely life for both of us. And there's nothing I can do about it.

LEVINE: Well, hopefully, he'll—

GELFAND: That's the only thing.

LEVINE: —be well enough to come—

GELFAND: I hope so. I'm trying taking him home, you know, just one day a week. I can take him for—I could take him for the weekend but it would be very costly. I pay the aide $70 to stay seven hours. Now, if I had one—I need one at night. I need one—she should be here early in the morning. It would cost me hundreds of dollars. I can't do that now with him there.

LEVINE: Okay. Is there anything—

GELFAND: So that's hard.

LEVINE: —else that you would like to say relevant to coming here and starting a new life here and—

GELFAND: Well, it—I was like born here. To me, I was born here. It's not any different for me here. And wait, I just want to show you—

LEVINE: You got the microphone on.

GELFAND: Oh, all right. When you'll take it off, I'll show you.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I think maybe that's a good place—

GELFAND: Yeah.

LEVINE: —to end, that you feel as though you were born here.

GELFAND: Exactly.

LEVINE: Okay.

GELFAND: I wouldn't want to be in any other country, just to visit. And I visited a lot of countries.

LEVINE: Oh.

GELFAND: We used to take monthly vacations and in a month you see plenty. So we went back and forth. We were in Israel. We were in Greece. We went almost all over Europe, Eastern Europe. And I'm very happy about that, that we were able to do that. After the children were married, we were able to do that. And we had very large weddings for the girls and my son had a wonderful wedding and everything turned out good.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I want to thank you very much for a most interesting interview.

GELFAND: You're welcome. [chuckles]

LEVINE: I've been speaking with Alice Gelfand, who came in 1921 when she was about seven. And today is September 29th, 1997 and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]