

**EI-975**

**LELO [PH] ROMIREZ**

**BIRTHDATE:**

**INTERVIEW DATE: DECEMBER 29, 1997**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 84**

**RUNNING TIME: 1:25:29**

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

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

**INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND**

**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:**

**GERMANY, 1962**

**AGE: 50**

**SHIP: THE UNITED STATES**

**PORT:**

**RESIDENCES:**

LEVINE: Today is December 29<sup>th</sup>, 1997 and I'm here in the oral history studio at Ellis Island with Lelo Romirez, who came from Germany in 1962 when she was 50 years of age. And [clears throat] maybe—this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service.

ROMIREZ: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And I would like to start out, if you could tell me again, please, for the tape your name that you were born with.

ROMIREZ: Yeah. Lieselotta Degenhart [PH].

LEVINE: And where in Germany were you born?

ROMIREZ: In Coblenz [PH] am Rhine [PH].

LEVINE: Okay.

ROMIREZ: In Germany, yeah.

LEVINE: And did you live in Coblenz up until you left?

ROMIREZ: No, until I was two years old. My parents moved to Cologne as—I consider myself as a Cologne girl. [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. And then you were in Cologne up until the time—

ROMIREZ: Yeah, but we lost everything, Cologne, '43. Uh-hmm. Yeah. The war, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMIREZ: Don't forget. We went through a horrible war.

LEVINE: Right.

ROMIREZ: [unclear], you know.

LEVINE: Well, maybe we could talk first about the period before the war.

ROMIREZ: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: You're growing up years. What did your father do?

ROMIREZ: He was a professor of music and had two music schools, one in Coblenz and one in Cologne then, you know. And he was always four days in Coblenz and then came back to—to Cologne. But he thought on the professional musician—want to be a concert pianist or a concert violinist.

LEVINE: He—he was both of those?

ROMIREZ: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMIREZ: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And what—what do you remember about your father as a little girl growing up? What kind of a person was he?

ROMIREZ: Oh, I was very—have a tremendous respect for my father. Yeah. Oh, yeah. I have seen him very seldom. Then he was with his orchestra on Sunday. Sometimes, I've seen him. [several words unclear] father and

that was wonderful, playing with him. When I was seven years old, my mother said to—you know, “It would be time that girl learned to play the piano.” And I hated—and so we played something from [unclear] Bach, a little composition to [unclear] and I made a mistake. So he—he get me. The only time in my life that he give my little bottom a beating and thrown me out of the music room. Oh, that was a relief. That [unclear]. [laughter]

LEVINE: So you didn’t like playing the piano at first?

ROMIREZ: No. But when I was 12 years old I [unclear] myself. Yeah. Then I started and then came a [unclear] tremendous problem with the Nazi. My mother—and when I was 16, my father could not afford it anymore, a pianist to accompany him. So I was then there.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMIREZ: Yeah. Then he was in Coblenz, you know. All [unclear] of myself but he was playing with his professional pianist. So from that time on when I was 16 years old, I was helping then my parents [unclear] all the time.

LEVINE: Did you—did you—did you like helping, from the time you were 16?

ROMIREZ: Oh, yeah. I—helping my family until I came to America.

LEVINE: Wow.

ROMIREZ: Now, I have a little brother, you know. He is 14 years younger than me. My oldest brother, Robert, and then was two boys in between but they died when they was born and so there is a gap between my brother, the little one and myself. So—and my mother died. That was before the war. Then I have to raise him in the war.

LEVINE: So Herbert was the oldest?

ROMIREZ: Oh, [unclear].

LEVINE: Robert?

ROMIREZ: No, I—I am the oldest

LEVINE: Oh, you’re the oldest.

ROMIREZ: Oh, and he’s a year—one-half year younger than me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then this baby 14—

ROMIREZ: And then the baby, Carl Heinz. Yeah.

LEVINE: Carl—Carl Heinz.

ROMIREZ: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And so what was your father's name?

ROMIREZ: Robert.

LEVINE: The same as your—

ROMIREZ: As my brother. The oldest. The name was Robert too.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about your mother? Her mai—maiden name? Her name and her maiden name?

ROMIREZ: Louisa—Louisa Maria Langer.

LEVINE: L-A-N-G-E-R?

ROMIREZ: Yeah, Langer. Yeah. It's a very old tradition name [several words unclear] family, goes back into the [unclear], all officers. And since the—the First World War I, [unclear] they're all getting dentists. [laughter] That a change.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Well, now [chuckles]—well, how about your mother? Did she—was she a musical person too?

ROMIREZ: No, she was an actor—actress.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMIREZ: But when we was born, the eldest—two eldest. Yeah? She only [unclear]. She spoke beautiful poems in the concert of my father there. I—I still have a poem from her. Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow.

ROMIREZ: And then she became very ill, thanks to the stinking Nazis. Oh, I'm sorry. [chuckles]

LEVINE: That's okay. [laughter] Okay. So did you—did you learn poems when you were a little girl? Was that—

ROMIREZ: I had—I have to sit in the kitchen and learn it and I even remember a few of them.

LEVINE: Could you recite any one of them that you remember?

ROMIREZ: Yeah, but only in German.

LEVINE: That's okay.

ROMIREZ: Yeah? All right. This about a woman [chuckles] and I liked it very much. [speaking in German]. This is from Goethe [PH].

LEVINE: Could you just tell what it—what—what it says?

ROMIREZ: Yeah, yeah. God [unclear] the world for a long time and create first the man. And when he look at that man, he was not satisfied with that man, you know. And so he took a rib from him and create a woman out of the man's rib. So—so is—so she come a little bit later than a man but God [unclear] her [unclear]. And then that is God's masterpiece, the woman made from [laughs] the rib of the man. This is one of famous Goethe.

LEVINE: Mmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah, this is very, very beautiful.

LEVINE: You recite it beautifully.

ROMIREZ: Oh. [chuckles]

LEVINE: You have a musical—you can tell you have a musical talent by the way you recite.

ROMIREZ: Yeah—

LEVINE: Well, that's beautiful. Okay. And how about your mother? What—what kind of a person was she? How do you remember her?

ROMIREZ: She was a very gentle and a very beautiful lady, very beautiful. You know, you might not believe it that after the war [unclear] haven't had a picture of her.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMIREZ: But I—I found a part of one [unclear] get it from her. Yeah, yeah. She was very gentle and, like my father, always helpful. You know,

[unclear] the bedtime. Get the children up, helping them, dress them [unclear] clothes [unclear] toys.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: She was a very kind, beautiful lady. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, you probably don't remember World War I because you were—

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: —small at that time.

ROMIREZ: Yeah, I know. I remember it very well when American—look, they have no bombs like the have now. They have—like coconuts and they're thrown like a coconuts [unclear]. When I was—my [unclear] three years old, I remember that. And oh, my mother always told me that we was on [unclear] and there was very old door. It was over 2,000 years old built by the [unclear]. And right there, we—we pass by and [unclear] fall right on that door, a bomb. And I'm sitting on my little bottom and turn around. That, I remember very well.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: And then when, always the clock tick that we have to go in the cellar. And I was so afraid of the dark. That, I remember very well.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: And was your father involved in the war?

ROMIREZ: He was a music master, yeah. In the war, I mean.

LEVINE: In the war?

ROMIREZ: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Y—

LEVINE: In the army?

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMIREZ: And my father in the Second War. He was 58 years old and they're making a soldier out of him, 58 years old. And my little brother, Carl Heinz, the youngest, he was 14 and they make a soldier out of him too.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: He was drafted to the SS. You know what I did? I lock him in a room for four weeks.

LEVINE: So he couldn't go?

ROMIREZ: No. I watch him. But when he would have gone [several words unclear]. And, oh, he was furious that I locked him. "I want to fight for my homeland," the idiot said. Now, I said, "You should be very grateful for that." [chuckles] I did that. I locked him in.

LEVINE: Well, how was it that you had such a different attitude from Carl Heinz?

ROMIREZ: I don't know. That was the instinct of—to survive, I guess. And that was in Cologne. We lost everything, '43, lost everything in Cologne. And what to do? And then we was touring in concerts over the whole Europe. And then we land in [unclear] and the town mayor in [unclear] said to my father, "When you promise me to build here a [unclear] music school we'll give you a house." And so we accepted. But there was no music school. It was too late then, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: And so we have a—he has a house, lost that too.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: I have a beautiful—a grand piano. I lost three grand pianos, concert grand piano. On these particular, there was very fond of Von Bluttner [PH]. We are now [clears throat] [unclear]. He was architect. And he said, "When you want to hide some things, then you have to leave." Well, my father was a soldier. "I keep it for you to find the man to give him 6,000 mark" with the—with the big [unclear] to—to get a big piano—wouldn't go in here on—on [unclear]. And he give me, I remember, a yellow piece of paper and signed it that he will take care of this—that [unclear], the piano and the organ and all the instruments. And then all furniture he would—until we could come back. And so—and then—but then the war over and my father came back from Russian prison. I was in, my brother, also in Russia prison. But he—my father came a year later. And then we want to have compensation. And my father—I have read that yellow letter from that man.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: He gave him—they give the office that paper that we have, you know, stole all the furniture. And they said, “All right, on—go and contact the office from Germany. Go and contact me that man in [unclear].” You know what he said? He have never saw us and we didn’t give him nothing.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember the buildup to the war? How—how life change for you and your family up until 1939?

ROMIREZ: It changed—with the Nazis, it changed already. That changed it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Completely.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Oh, yeah. I remember that very well indeed.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: [sighs] Yeah.

LEVINE: Can you—can you say anything about the buildup of the Nazis, what you experienced?

ROMIREZ: Yeah. I know it very well. I even went to school. That was in Coblenz then. My—my youngest brother was not even born. So when—when I came out of school were always the fighting between the Nazis, the communists. There were 150 other parties, always shooting, shooting. You couldn’t come home. And finally, that was an end. And then we moved from Coblenz. Then Carl Heinz was then born, moved from Coblenz to Cologne. And that was the beginning of ’33 when we moved there. And my mother had a brother in—in French, cl—close by to [unclear]. They all was dentists and he was the youngest of—of the dentists. And she wrote—oh, no. That—that come later. No. My father have keep scholarships for six or eight Jewish very talented pianists and violinists, give them—they haven’t had the money to pay for the [unclear]. And he wrote to the train ministerium [PH] to—to give them the free fare. They came from far away. So my father wrote to them and they did. [unclear] here. And now come the Nazis in power. They have had that letter, you know. They was Jewish, Jewish students. Very funny. [unclear] Jewish people too. Our best friends

were all Jewish. My mother spoke perfect Hebrew. And you know why? Where she is born, she had a very good friend and they have a big store and she should learn Hebrew. And she said, "I don't want to learn Hebrew." My mother said, "You learn and I'll learn with you." And through that, she spoke perfect Hebrew, my mother too. Very—she was, anyway, very interested in [several words unclear]. It is the history [unclear] Israel [several words unclear] Protestants. And my grandfather, his father—her father always want to go to Israel. And all of sudden, my mother say that too. "Oh, God. I would love so much to go." And you now know, I started thinking that. Isn't that funny?

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: It is. Now, were you Lutherans?

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Was that your—

ROMIREZ: Lutherans, yeah.

LEVINE: A—

ROMIREZ: O—over 300 years, you can go back.

LEVINE: Wow. And was your family religious? Were you—

ROMIREZ: No. No, not [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMIREZ: But I believe in very, very close to God. I live right on the ocean, you know, that the ocean and the sky. That is my church.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: I don't believe in any church, sorry to say.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: My parents either. But believe in—in God. My father's born in the forest.

LEVINE: In the forest?

ROMIREZ: My father.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: And—and for over 200 years, the Degenharts [PH], all born in the forest. And he wrote a beautiful song when it—it said, “God goes through the forest on that—should a tree whisper, ‘Be quiet. God is coming.’” Such a beautiful song.

LEVINE: Mmm.

ROMIREZ: You know?

LEVINE: Mmm.

ROMIREZ: I—he lost all his compositions but I still have that one.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMIREZ: Yeah. So I played first on the organ. You know, on the cello and violin. So—and then I used the second tape recorder and accomplished myself with the organ.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: And that’s all.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

ROMIREZ: It is—[unclear] m—magnificent. And all the composition all [unclear] one of them there. Yeah.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: And so I—I want to say, yeah, we—

LEVINE: W—we—oh, I’m sorry. Go ahead.

ROMIREZ: Yeah, with my father, you know, keep the scholarship to Jewish—

LEVINE: Jewish, uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: —students. But there, my—then come the Nazi. That was maybe two, three years before, you know. And now my mother [unclear] daughter, you know, all to her brother who was a dentist in French. That, the

Nazis, they come in power [unclear] what they think they are. All t—t—the cleaning in the streets and—and selling newspaper on the corner. They're sitting in the most important jobs, what will be Germany now. This [unclear] the Nazis. [unclear] and—and call names when these Naz—names [unclear]. And through that, they had my father [unclear] already with these boys, [unclear] scholarship. They couldn't do nothing then and they write that letter for my mother.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: And they asked my mother to come—come to the police [unclear]. So she said, "So I'm going"—I still see her standing there with a big handbag and have the key in her hand. "I'm going shopping now and then I go to the [unclear] and see what they want from me." And she didn't come back. She didn't die—died later, but thanks to them. But couldn't understand where she was. And [several words unclear] until my father—"Did your wife wrote it?" "Oh, yes. That is her handwriting," but she usually—he always write [unclear]. All right. Well, enough on that letter. [unclear] could practically do nothing then. But they went back through the scholarships there, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: And yeah. Yeah, b—but it's my [unclear] her handbag and there's the key and there's the money purse. She is in Klinger Butz [PH]. That is a horrible, horrible prison in Cologne, Klinger Butz. My father went there. He couldn't believe it so he—he called a brother there in Paris. He came and get the best lawyer. What was his name? Now, I can't remember [unclear]. He came and that lawyer said, "That is what I'm waiting for. Then your wife, she's right." But it took still seven, eight months. Then they release her.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: Because they was afraid of that lawyer there, that he said [unclear]. She said, "She's right. Why is she here?" And so on. Eh?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, how was she treated in those months?

ROMIREZ: Horrible. My mother told me they would [unclear] stones and [several words unclear]. And she have to spit on the stones and have to use a

brush and polish it everyday, all day long, an overseer's daughter. In that time, there was overseer's daughter different than today.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Believe me, that's—and that was collected and [unclear]. You know?

LEVINE: What—what was the—describe what an overseer's daughter—or what an overseer—what was that position at that time?

ROMIREZ: An overseer? It's a [unclear] the wrong person and [chuckles] from—from all the profession. An overseer. Not like here. No, is different. And not anymore but in that time, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah, in that time. Yeah. And then she came out so thin and then she asked for my father and their little one, you know. And we took them and put them on the table and she—you know, [unclear] him. Yeah, and then she came home and die, and I have to raise him and I have to—I have the other brother, you know, and take care of my father, and then came the war.

LEVINE: Hmm. And what did you experience personally of the war?

ROMIREZ: You know, hell. And we was constantly on the concert [unclear]. Constantly. And that the Nazi—we lost everything, thanks to the Nazi. But my father, before he was married, he always said, "I have to explain to the youth where our masters, [unclear], Mozart, Shubert, that they not forget it." Before he was married.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: And I remember that.

LEVINE: It was his mission to do that. Uh-huh.

ROMIREZ: And I remember, I said, "Daddy, what is about militare and [unclear]? It's all young people?" Oh, yeah, and they were so successful. So successful with these young people. And the Nazi liked it. And you know why?

LEVINE: Why?

ROMIREZ: Their [unclear] minister were doubled [several words unclear]. He is under Goebbels, you know. [unclear] is the minister. So we played

Tchaikovsky, have it—you know, warm it with Russians, yeah, Russian composer. And so, Ava Maria [PH] [unclear] Shubert. So they send it to this minister, this program. And so my father should come. I said, “I’m going.” So what we—it took me three days to arrive there. And when I opened the door, was an elderly man. He said, “My God. You are so young. I follow your careers from the first time you have given the concerts.” And [unclear] this gentleman that my father knows when he’s a young man, and he helping my father when he was so young. But there he was, the [several words unclear] minister. And he protect us. We always was wondering—we had all the problem with the town Nazis—why we are so protected. We could do what we like, so far, classical music [unclear]. And that was him. Wasn’t that something?

LEVINE: Mmm.

ROMIREZ: As a—and he was a very elderly gentleman and we are lost three or four weeks, everything. And you couldn’t buy nothing. When you was a multimillionaire, you couldn’t get nothing. You need the coupons. When he give him [unclear] back, he close everything. And then I mention that I have a little brother. He was [unclear] yet. All the children in the big towns, they was [unclear] yet. Eh? Yeah, they didn’t know nothing from the war. They—it was very [unclear]. England too, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, did you lose everything because—

ROMIREZ: Of the [unclear].

LEVINE: Because your father had written that letter or—or why did you—

ROMIREZ: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: —everything?

ROMIREZ: We lost everything to—that he was the husband of my mother and that he [unclear], that he give the scholarships to the Jewish.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: That did. He had no [unclear]. Everything was canceled and we didn’t know [unclear] were but we—he felt it. They watch us. Everything was [unclear], finish.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: And then all of a sudden there, and that was such minister, that elderly gentleman, he helping us. What—

LEVINE: Did—did you see people change? People you had been friendly with who became Nazis? Did you—

ROMIREZ: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: —still have—

ROMIREZ: Yeah, yeah. That, I'm telling you, they change so much already, brown uniform. Then when they thought who you were, they're boss. You know? [sentence unclear]. We had a hor—horrible, horrible time, bad on my mother, you know. And Carl Heinz so little, and then came the war.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: We went through it. Yeah.

LEVINE: Were there many people like you and your family that—that opposed the Nazis, that—that were—were—

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: —put upon for some reasons or—

ROMIREZ: No. It was so—coward. My mother had [unclear] a best, best friend. Lillian were her name. Well, my mother was a great reader. On all our books were our name, so when that problem was when she was in jail, there she comes with all the books where our name was written and give it to me (I was alone) and said, "Here, I don't want to have nothing to do with your name. And here's the books, so goodbye." It was—for years, I—I'd grown up with her—with her daughter. But that let me think. So young I was. That let me think. You know? From that moment, I was through with the German.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: With all [unclear]. Yeah. Oh, but that helped us to play and later for the English, American and French soldier la—later.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Oh, it's pity. I should have [unclear] and, you know, [chuckles] how beautiful [unclear] from them. Yeah.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: They helping us, yeah, that we get a bed. We always slept on the floor. I—I couldn't see that my father [unclear] slept on the floor. And I spoke—I couldn't speak English, my father, [unclear]. And so I st—say that to the commander. He spoke very well English—German. But I cannot bear to see my father lying there on the floor. Next day came just along for my father, the English commander sent. [unclear], yeah.

LEVINE: Wow, wow. We're going to pause right here, Lelo, while Kevin turns the tape over.

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: We'll just pause for a minute.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: Okay. We're—we're resuming now—

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: —on the second side.

ROMIREZ: Yeah. Also, that was then [unclear] live in Coblenz where Carl Heinz was born in that time. And there was—also, my father has [unclear] the music school in Coblenz, not in—where moved to Cologne—Cologne. So it was. And we—our best friend—friends was Dr. Hertz [PH], our doctor. And he had three or four children and a Jewish wife and came the—the—the Nazi, as they [unclear] in power, you know. Then they was then in Cologne. Our—my father always go four days to Coblenz, you know. "And you divorce your wife and you can save your—your practice. You know what to do." You know what he did? He divorced his wife and my father and students from him transport her to a— [unclear]. This is a very big mountains with—with for—lot of trees and so they could hide [unclear]. And my father and four students [several words unclear]. They never told my mother or me. He told me that after the war. I said, "Why you didn't tell me that before?" And said, "Woman never can keep quiet." And he did not say this thing [unclear].

LEVINE: Now, they hid the doc—the doctor's wife?

ROMIREZ: The—his wife—

LEVINE: For how long?

ROMIREZ: —and three children.

LEVINE: For how long did they—

ROMIREZ: So long the Nazi was in power. Yeah. And now, my father always—he disappear once in a while. [unclear] his students—the [unclear] students brought her food, and was in a very beautiful place. And after the war, we were—I saw the site. Oh, I said, “Look, there is Dr. Hertz. Let’s say hello to her.” And there she was there. He remarried her after the war, after the Nazis was gone. Yeah. Okay. The [unclear] was to get her in the same house and the [unclear] was theirs again. Yeah. Yeah, that is—that—that is a [unclear]. And then—then I told my father when we went out, “Why you didn’t tell me?” And he said, “You women, you cannot keep your mouths [unclear].” My mother didn’t know either.

LEVINE: It was probably safer that way too.

ROMIREZ: Yeah. That is—yeah, [unclear] too.

LEVINE: Mmm.

ROMIREZ: Hmm. And so that was then again together—

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: —with his Jewish wife, [unclear] safe. And I have heard that very many have done that. Not [unclear], you know.

LEVINE: You mean divorced and—

ROMIREZ: Divorced.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Then remarried later, hide her somewhere in Switzerland or so, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Now, you said that your father, as well as your brother, were drafted into the military, into the Nazis.

ROMIREZ: [unclear] 58 years old.

LEVINE: Did—

ROMIREZ: '44.

LEVINE: Did he have to go? Did he actually serve?

ROMIREZ: Yeah, yeah. He served. He was in Russian prison and my brother, the—the little one—you know he was—I think he was f—or 15 years old, tal—taller than me, a—a big boy, he was. And he come here to [unclear], “You have to go there and there. You have to be there.” I thought that is what they think. And I locked him in. He was mad like hell. And that was a good thing. For four weeks, and then that was over. And [chuckles] —

LEVINE: Oh, just those four weeks?

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then the war was over?

ROMIREZ: No.

LEVINE: No.

ROMIREZ: They was gone.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMIREZ: [unclear].

LEVINE: Ah.

ROMIREZ: Yeah, they was gone. No, the war was not—took another [unclear] year, I think.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMIREZ: Yeah, it was not [unclear]. Yeah, my father was in Russian prison. Look, A—America, even after the war or—or during the war, t—till the last phase of the war, not Europe—East Europe, we was in [unclear]. To that, we came in Russian prison. We're—my brother and I'm sitting on the [unclear] to go over the Muldaur [PH] to escape. But we couldn't. The Russian came already so that we was in Russian prison. Yeah.

LEVINE: You were in a Russian prison?

ROMIREZ: Yeah, with my brother, the little one. We live only—now, look at me too—on grass and leaves, 5,000 women and hundred thousand soldier, it was.

LEVINE: Wow.

ROMIREZ: Yeah. C—only grass and leaves. All of a sudden, there was no grass or no leaves anymore. [unclear]—

LEVINE: How long were you imprisoned?

ROMIREZ: Three-quarter of a year. The winter came. Then came the winter. And then they took us to Austria. And we're sitting on the wagon, the farmer with their [unclear]. [unclear] sitting and there was a young woman with us with a little girl was three years old on her lap. And all of sudden, she screamed, "Oh, that is my husband's grave!" In the middle of field. And the whole [unclear], 65 on this wagon, stopped. The Russians stopped it that she could go to the grave and it—picking flowers and put it on the grave. And I started to sing, "Nearer my God to me." And we are all singing on all [unclear] in [unclear]. Beautiful. And the Russians stood there and was crying. Beautiful. We sung it so beautiful. And she—she kneeling there on that grave. That, I never would forget that. Believe me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: And then she came and the Russian [unclear] the baby and—and then we continue. Then we was maybe 10 miles. There come whole [unclear] from that way. Russian. Full of Russian soldier. [breathes sharply] And they're looking to—down to us and—and I said to [unclear], "Let us sing a—that Russian folk song." We call it [speaking in German] in—in German. Let's—it's a Russian folk song, beautiful song. And we sung that so beautiful. And the boys, they stood there and was crying when they heard that folk song. And that saved us too.

LEVINE: Oh!

ROMIREZ: It was so beautiful that this woman, [unclear] only woman with children was singing, that these Russian soldier—we were so afraid of them—that they was crying.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah. Just far—I would never forget this. [unclear] think—I always thinking of that. It was wonderful.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. How do you feel about the Russians, having been through the—that experience?

ROMIREZ: The—the Russian, actually, I must say, there was [unclear] sleep so in the field, you know. They raped the woman and they're begging her, "Please, I have five children," and so—and they came to me one day and I have had two boys. One's my brother, the two boys. I picked them up. They had no mother with me. And so with—with—with [unclear] and my face and with a rifle there, I didn't say nothing. I give them a kick that the rifle [unclear] that man and that's that. And the men and that's that. And that was the end of that. Next day, I make myself so pretty I could [unclear] and take [unclear] a program where we had played during the war, during the Nazi side, Tchaikovsky, the Russian composer, and a picture of my father. And I went to the commander, the Russian commander. He was so nice. My brother in his Hitler uniform. You couldn't get nothing for him. There he stood. He [unclear]—he [unclear] and I [unclear]. Oh, my God! I was terrified. I said, "I hope he stay like that." No, he give salute that Russian officer. Well, my—my brother had some nice blond hair and blue eyes, the typical German boy, eh?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: And he laughs and he give him a chair and asked me. And I complain about that, that I almost was raped the night before but I kicked him. "Good," he said. [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh!

ROMIREZ: Yeah, and then I show him the picture from my father on the program.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: That was very clever of me that I did that.

LEVINE: Yes.

ROMIREZ: And so he said, "I will look for him." And we found him. And he give him the hand and give both of us a little bit to eat. And I should—at least two hours with that man. You know, in that horrible trouble where I was in, I never have seen such a handsome man than he was. [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMIREZ: I don't—I notice. [laughs] And what trouble I was and very fine—you know, the Russian can be very noble. They—I mean, the educated, of course. [unclear]. Same thing, you know, [unclear]. And then from that time on Sunday morning, he sent priests, a Catholic and a Protestant priest to us and asked for me and told them he couldn't find my father but he would still look for him. Yeah, didn't find him. No.

LEVINE: Not—never?

ROMIREZ: No. We have to walk to [unclear] before we are [unclear] to the Russian, 300 kilometer in 10 days. Can you imagine the [unclear] feet I have? I still suffering from that. Yeah. But we went through it, that too.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: Hot. It's hot over there [unclear]. But we did not find my father. Uncle—I went in the evening then to go home quick. I found a piano, that house, there was a [unclear] big hole. I always climb into that hole and practiced the piano. But nobody in the house [chuckles] and I just went home and—and all of a sudden, said a man with [several words unclear], “Hi, [unclear]. Wie geht's [unclear]?” That were my father. I couldn't believe it with such a beard, red beard, had black hair and red beard. How is that possible? That was my father. No. I worked for a tailor. Yeah, I get [unclear] and for my brother [unclear]. And w—he—walking for him. And so he couldn't pay me but I need money from my father, you know. So I work in a—in a salt factory. I want to have coupons to buy me food. And they didn't give me the food. You have to work. So was—sent you to the salt factory. I never talked to a—to a factory person, never. We had not a chance. That was the most wonderful girls I ever met.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. What—what were they like? What do you remember about them?

ROMIREZ: Oh, the—Hildegarde, special. See, [unclear] have practically nothing to eat. See, [unclear] always so little bit what the mother have cooked, she should give it to me. Yeah, and so [unclear]. And she—I—my job was—they were half bombed, the whole factory—well, only one floor. So I have to bend down and fill the—the pockets with salt powder. I have all of sudden blond hair and—and all that inflamed my nails. And then I was—[unclear] came, this—the [unclear] to talk to me. And I couldn't go up. I have to [chuckles] go—go to him like that. He said, “What is the matter with you?” I said, “My back hurt me so much I cannot go straight.”

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: And then he brought us his living room, a beautiful table so that I could stay up. As I always have so little bit luck, always. You know?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: So that was a big thing. For me, it was everything.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: You know?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: And after I was walking there I crawl into that hole and practice two—two hours on the piano. And then I working for that tailor—

LEVINE: And—

ROMIREZ: —the whole night. Yeah?

LEVINE: How long did you do that?

ROMIREZ: Oh! A—a year.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. What year was this now when you were doing that?

ROMIREZ: Was in '45.

LEVINE: '45.

ROMIREZ: '45.

LEVINE: Mmm.

ROMIREZ: '46. [unclear] in '46. Yeah, and my brother, you know, he need guardians. They don't accept me as a guardian. When I went to the courthouse there, I saw my brother. He wasn't a—a big boy, you know, with a cigarette in his mouth and—and [unclear] with four men. I said, "Carl Heinz. Yeah, what do you want with that [unclear]?" I almost get a fit. You know, I didn't say nothing. I [unclear] take that cigarette right in his throat. He said, "Do you know? I still can feel it." Well, that was [unclear]. Said, "Good." Yeah, the—I was there with the labor exchange. I went with him and sat in the courthouse. But they have not a job for him. "Yeah," he said. He was then 15 years old, no school, nothing, looking for baker, helping a baker. So, good. We are

walking [unclear] six miles to go there. And then he said, "Oh, I'm so glad having you." And we got a nice dinner from him and I couldn't go home. My feet hurt me too much. So I'm sitting all night in a chair [unclear]. [unclear] nice room, nice bed. And so—so he became a baker.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMIREZ: Was a—I was [unclear]. You know, I—I have had nothing [unclear], you know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROMIREZ: And then I compensate there in the salt factory, [several words unclear] for stockings, yeah, and for a little hat or a scarf.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: I was [unclear], you know, compensate all day long. Yeah. And then come my papa and I saved his violin, two of them.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMIREZ: Carried it all the time. And when I was with this officer there, I told him that I have the violin for my father and I'm afraid that the [unclear] want to steal it from me. Mmm. And he told me when they could go, the same morning. I—I have to open the—that box with the two violin. [speaking in German]. And behind me was [unclear] officer. "How dare you are to touch this violin!" And he close it [several words unclear] and then came the wagon. I was on the last wagon. [unclear] I told you with the woman, that child. Then I jumped on there and [several words unclear] my violin. Yeah. Just last year I have given it to my father. [chuckles] You see.

LEVINE: Do you remember when the war was over?

ROMIREZ: [unclear]

LEVINE: What—what do you remember of that day?

ROMIREZ: That was in Czechoslovakia. [unclear] and the market was all churches. Beautiful. [unclear] a beautiful country, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: And very musical and [unclear], yeah. And that was when Hitler—we have—Hitler died. We have had the—the—from the soldier, the mayor in the cellar. And I went downstairs and [unclear], you know, “The Hitler is dead.” And they said, “Good!” And they went away, left the poor soul lying there, the mails, you know, or couldn’t do nothing with it. The whole cellar was full of sacks with mail from the—the soldier on there, just the [unclear]. I was all alone with my little violin. Yeah. And then it stopped. My fiancé came. That was two days before. He was a doctor and he said, “I have here the paper. We’re married today and you commit me as my nurse.” And I said to him, “I want to support my father.” “Yeah, I marry you, not your family.” I said, “You know, [unclear] the war, the one—not over the war then until the war is over. And then let’s talk about it.” So I brought him to the station and when I came back, they have start the revolution. The whole house was full [unclear]. I’ve had such a beautiful [unclear] piano and somebody had [unclear] the whole room full of [several words unclear]. And everybody have some things under their arm, what they stole.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: And I caught that man [several words unclear]. And now I will tell you how to play the piano. And I played for them the [several words unclear]. [several words unclear], yeah, all the things under their arms. Yeah, I remember that so well. I had to [unclear] in the museum.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: And so they put everything back, everything. And that man that played on my piano disappeared too. So I said, “That was a good thing.” And next day, start revolution. Was a very big place there in—in one line. That was a [unclear] police with machine gun back to back with the German officers, they all of them with machine gun. And they hold the—the peace, you know, [unclear] the airport and up in the night already the airplanes and every—oh, it was awful. But I was very, very lucky. Who was out stealing, they came next day and brought our bread and on a big glass with herring. Herring.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah, and—and brought me always some things to eat here and there. Yeah, and then—then I have to leave then. I have a—a bicycle. My cello—I’m a cellist, you know. I have a [unclear] cello. I have my [several words unclear], the bicycle with the [unclear] things in. And

then come the [unclear] take my cello. They take the bicycle and [unclear] was the end of the—but thank goodness. I have another [unclear] violin [unclear]. I have [unclear]. And that would be on the bicycle. That would be—have gone too.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah. So started then, oh, to go over the Muldaur with the panzam [PH], with the tank, sitting on the tank. I have had a revolver. Yeah. They have given me a revolver to protect me. I never use it. I say—I give them rather a [several words unclear] use a revolver. [several words unclear] revolver, small revolver. And I said [unclear] men, they had a [unclear], “I give you here a revolver and a [unclear], and you let us go over there—over”—“Oh, yes. Come.” So we went down [unclear] with the tank and [unclear]. And when we arrive on the other side from the Muldaur, was a beautiful little house. And he said, “Go to my wife. They gave us a little bit to eat. We didn’t eat already for two days, sleeping [unclear]. And they give us beautiful to eat and I could take a shower. And then we are sitting on the tank again and went to the American. See? That was Russian, was—was American. So there they come, arrived—come a Russian officer and a American. And I said that we have to give our revolver [unclear] officers on the tank, eh? That they give the revolvers on the tank, we have to leave the tank and we have to walk, always with my violin case. And then we’re sitting there where we could sit, you know. Now, [unclear] the water. And I found a box and I put the pump in it. And I said [unclear], “There is a pump. Try to get [unclear] water.” And he went there and he was flabbergast when he came back with the water and said, “Do you know that Americans also are there?” He spoke a Cologne dialect. How is that possible? [laughter] Is quite funny, no? Yeah, in the meantime, the Russian came then [unclear], thought we were [unclear] American, that America have given East Europe to the Russian [unclear] Russian. Oh, there was [unclear]. We get nothing to eat, nothing. But they didn’t do nothing to us. And then in [unclear], again, a war when the SS shooting. And that’s [several words unclear]. And they sung so beautiful the German folk song that the Russians stood there and they [unclear]. And they were all [unclear] in that way. The light went on all night. So [unclear] next day went again for water to [unclear]. [chuckles] He was still there. And there come the woman to me. [unclear] have the powder in the hand. “I have five children. I will poison them. I don’t want to be with the—the Russian. No, I—I poisoned them.” At least women came, want to have [unclear] could poison them. I just hit them under the hand. I said, “Wait and see. I am in the same position.” Oh, wait. And later, I met them in Austria. Yeah, the same children. Yeah.

LEVINE: They remembered?

ROMIREZ: Yeah, I remembered. They recognized me and we have to climbing up there where there's the farm, you know, keep the straw. And I knocked on the window to get a little potato [unclear]. [unclear] started [unclear] on [unclear].

LEVINE: Wow. So what happened then? How did you—how did you come—what happened after the war was over? Were—you were in—in Germany—

ROMIREZ: In Germany.

LEVINE: —for a while.

ROMIREZ: Uh-hmm, yeah. In [unclear], yeah. And was elderly man was sleeping with us [unclear] with the Russian. And they have to leave. I have to [unclear] two boys. They were so tall already. And they have to leave and I kept them and I said, "You're sitting down [unclear]." I get them to—then came the Red Cross and I—we have to give them the children to the Red Cross. And I did. And that elderly man have to go and he give me a hundred mark. Thinking, of course, nothing [unclear], I took the hundred mark. And you know, with the hundred mark, I start my new life. Yeah. Yeah, that's—get something to eat and so on. Yeah. Oh, yeah. And then working for the tailor, you know, in a salt factory. They was my best friend later. So love—lovely girls, really. So you always learn, you know. [unclear]. I went through hell but always so little nice moments.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: And you like to think of them when thinking of [unclear] what's happened, you know.

LEVINE: You've been through so many extreme circumstance. Do you—what would you say about human nature, just given the extremes of it that you've seen?

ROMIREZ: I—I would say I was very disappointed. I cannot comb my hair [unclear] a hairbrush [several words unclear]. Strong. Strong from—you have to sit on it, not the Russian with the Americans. The Germans. Yeah. Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: When did you decide to come to this country?

ROMIREZ: That was when my—my father died, '59. Or, no, it was before, before he getting ill in England. It was my intention to go to America. [unclear] my father spoke perfect English but he was—laid away, sick at the [unclear] in the [unclear]. [sentence unclear]. And so then I came back. I was only two months there but in the two months I make the connection for later with [unclear] then. Yeah. Was very helpful. And I wrote to the Labor Exchange in German. The impression I have had of the English people there [unclear], the girls, the German girls that want to learn English, how they treated them [unclear], really, [several words unclear]. Then they wrote to me, "You can go to Venezuela. [unclear] to Venezuela, Africa or [unclear] America." My father said, "You go to America and I'm going in a home." I said, "No." I [unclear] four years with my father after that. I said, "I will get the opportunity again," and I did after I buried him, went back to England where I was before. He was a veteran there. And his relative, [unclear], his son, they have had a little baby, want to see from America they came. And I said, "I would love to go to America." "Really?" she said, the lady. "My—my sister will be glad having you for the four children." I never took care of children but I was pretty good with them. I could run faster than they did [laughs] and teach them swimming. They all [several words unclear]. They couldn't even swim. And so—and all the neighbors, 17 girls, had children. Every Saturday and Sunday on the bicycle, swimming. They could all not swim. I taught them swimming. It was beautiful. I never thought I'm so good with the children. [chuckles] It was lovely. That was with the beginning then. Yeah. You know, and they sponsor me. His sister [several words unclear] in Miami.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMIREZ: I think I was two or three months already in America after that.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay. This is the—we're ending the tape here and then I'd like to finish up on—on another tape. We'll just start another tape and—and finish up—

ROMIREZ: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: —the rest of the story. Okay?

ROMIREZ: Isn't that [unclear]?

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

LEVINE: Okay. We're beginning now tape two and I'm speaking with Lelo Romirez, who [clears throat] came from Germany in 1950 on the ship called the United States.

ROMIREZ: '60—'62.

LEVINE: When you were 50 in 1962.

ROMIREZ: So, yeah.

LEVINE: Sorry.

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, I'm glad—

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: —you caught me on that one.

ROMIREZ: [laughs]

LEVINE: Okay. [chuckles] You were saying that if you didn't have all those horrendous, really, experiences behind—

ROMIREZ: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: —you in Europe—

ROMIREZ: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: —you would have had a difficult time—

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: —getting along here in the United States. Could you explain that more?

ROMIREZ: Yeah, and that was my sponsor, McArthur [PH] Dairy Farm in Miami, eh? On there, you know, I have had no piano anymore. And she have a piano that her father give her the—the first Christmas when I was here, the most beautiful piano I ever saw [unclear]. No, I thought I'm going to see how it sound. And I played and there was a lot of—I have to—to complain. I went back to that store and tell them. And they [unclear], Mrs. Davis, were her name, [unclear], "You play the piano?" "Oh, yes, a little bit." And that did it. Then she couldn't play. That—

that I—I did that a few times and I was fired instantly. And that was on a Thanksgiving Day, not from these people. That was in California. Here was the piano and I'm sitting there [unclear]. And this lady, she was a bar singer but she want to be a concert singer, but I didn't know that. And the head teacher, she was there. It was a lady and—but she spoke beautiful prayer, you know, on Thanksgiving Day. And I was inspired—inspired to [unclear] how beautiful she spoke. I just turn around and set her [unclear] in music. I accompanied her on the piano but they didn't know that I played the piano, you know. I have—thank goodness, I have f—from my father inherited that I would be able to improvise. And my God, she look at me later [unclear]. Then we ate together and the teacher sitting opposite from me, you know, all of sudden I was the middle point and [unclear], you know. She said, "You know, it was beautiful." And she—she—she understood what I want to say in the music. And so [unclear] come the evening, what do you know? Next day, I should make my driver license, you know. Then she said—come, the lady told me that, "I didn't hire a pianist. I hired a governess for my children." And he was Dutchman and the daughter was 16 years old, a beautiful girl. I taught her how to come down the stairs with 16 [unclear], and all the guests were there. I said, "Don't touch, just walking." And I stood and direct her and she looked so beautiful. And she did that. She was a stepmother. She was the fifth woman already from her—that girl's father, you know. And she looks like a little princess. I was so proud of her. And she didn't like that. And then came that with the Thanksgiving Day and I was fired in the evening. Now, I call my teacher that—I said, "I cannot make my driver license tomorrow. I must find out that I found a bed to sleep in. I don't know what to do with all my luggage." You know, 14 suitcases. He said, "Be a Jewish, we are always helping. I'm coming tomorrow at 10 o'clock with a station wagon with my wife and you stay outside with all your suitcases." And I did. And there he came and he took me right on the ocean. On the left side was a—was from Holland or Sweden, a little colony that was his friends. So I have had a little house for myself. [chuckles] [unclear] no—no television. And he said to her, "How much is the lady to pay?" Oh, yeah. He said, "Five dollars a day." She said she had no five dollar. "Three dollar is enough," he said. [laughs] Yeah. And they said, "What—how much you have to pay, you know, for the television? Would love to have a television." He—he said, "Yes, you have to pay the week, \$10." He said, "No. You put that television in there and she pay \$3. That's all." She say, "[unclear] and she was fired and she don't know where to go." A Jewish man and his wife were out there helping me with all of my suitcases. And I have [unclear] he was tremendously—you know, that was the kitchen, the bedroom, and there was a little room with a washing machine, all for \$3 a day. [chuckles] Don't tell me I'm not lucky, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: So then I slept three days, didn't even wake up. I was so exhausted. Yeah. And then two weeks it took me, swimming, and so—and then I get a new job. [laughs]

LEVINE: So did you—did you continue working as a governess? Is that what you did after that?

ROMIREZ: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah, still. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Tell—we skipped a part about your coming to this country. Do you remember coming into the New York harbor?

ROMIREZ: Oh, very well. We have had a very rough sea.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: You know, when I left Germany. We have to stay in S—in England all day because was too rough, the sea. I never thought that would make a difference in such a tremendous ship, you know.

LEVINE: Where did you leave from? What port?

ROMIREZ: Well, near Bremen. No—

LEVINE: Bremen.

ROMIREZ: I cannot remember.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMIREZ: But Bremen there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then it stopped in Southampton.

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMIREZ: And my—my friend, [unclear] her eldest son came—went with me. And her daughter—she was to—seven or ten years old. And she coming now, next year.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: I still friend with them, yeah, after all the years.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

ROMIREZ: Yeah. And so I have had no money. I didn't spend one penny. It was such a magnificent food. And I share my cabin with an Indian lady from India. Yeah. And so I wash myself and she sitting in bed and watching me, you know, and I was not used to such a thing. So when she was—her—her time to wash herself and she take all, like a bandage, her—her clo—her beautiful material. That were only one piece of st—of material like a bandage [unclear] one. No brassiere, [chuckles] no panties. [laughs]

LEVINE: She was just wrapped around, uh-huh.

ROMIREZ: And I said to her—there was [unclear] when she just came from India. We picked her up here—there, you know. I said, "You know, when you arrive in America [chuckles], you need warm clothes." "Why?" "[unclear] [chuckles] no clothes. Is very, very cold." "Oh, really? That is"—her husband was here already two years and was a lawyer. "That is why he said he buying a coat. I always wonder why—for what he buying me a coat." But lovely—a lovely, lovely darling she was.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: And I was sick. You know, you're getting seasick, not because of the emotional. When the continent is the [unclear] or something.

LEVINE: How did you feel leaving—leaving Germany?

ROMIREZ: Oh, I was glad; that I must say. Yeah, I was really glad. I have such a horrible time, so difficult. Everything difficult, difficult, difficult. I get this [unclear] here from this girl. I told you. I pack and send to England and there I started. But I went back to say goodbye to them and to my eldest brother, which, as I start in Germany. But I send everything now—now, England and five or six years later I picked it up from here. [chuckles] Yeah.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: And I was glad. I [unclear] and all of sudden the continental disappear, was a very strange feeling but I did not cry. I get a little bit anxious.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah, and, oh, such a horrible, horrible, horrible weather. And then it was snowing. I said, "Must see what goes on," and I go—all ropes, you know in the—in—in the rooms. There was a little piano. And there's nobody here from—play the piano. And also with the piano on that side and another one back to that side. And I couldn't get up. [chuckles] I was always falling and all of sudden, someone would hold me [laughs] and put the rope onto me and the piano. Yeah. And [unclear] ropes [unclear]. I said, "That was funny, you know." [chuckles] I took it with a sense of humor. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow.

ROMIREZ: Yeah. And then this horrible, horrible weather. And then my steward was a colored man, you know. I'm lying there in bed and see a colored man before me. I said, "What are you doing here?" Or I couldn't say that so properly but let him know that I didn't like that. Yeah. He said, "Do you want to lie in bed all trip? You haven't eaten now for three days. And you get out of that bed immediately." And I said, "And you go out immediately that I can [unclear]." So then—then I'm getting dressed and believe it or not, I'm sitting still in my panties [chuckles], he come back. He came back and I have with my clothes lying there, and he helped me put it over me and put me over his shoulder with a big blanket. I was so sick, you know, and go upstairs with me, hired a [unclear] deck chair, put blanket on me and bring me an apple and— and some crackers. Then I felt better so that was the beginning. And I have never saw a color person but he was a darling. [unclear].

LEVINE: You never saw a colored person before that?

ROMIREZ: No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMIREZ: You know? And then [unclear] this that this Indian lady and she starts too getting so sick. And I did the same thing with her. Yeah?

[chuckles] Like a bandage, put it round her, put her under my—my shoulder and brought her upstairs. [laughs] I did the same thing with— with her and she [unclear] a lot too. Yeah, and then [unclear] lousy weather and then they said, “We are close to New York.” And I go outside, [unclear] and—and the [unclear]. And I [unclear] that too. Right before me in the—in the—the evening on the sunset, red, that was all clear all of sudden. There, she stood there. Do you know I cried?

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah, yeah. It was a wonderful moment [unclear].

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah. And then I—that—through that, I was waiting until everybody was gone, after that big envelope, you know, as American, you know. And nobody was there. I couldn’t find my luggage. I—they told me, “There is your luggage,” but it was a empty room. I never thought to look up. And there come the men. I said, “Where is my suitcase cover?” “What is your initial?” What is initial? I didn’t know what that was? “What is your name?” I said, “Degenhart.” They look upstairs. There is D. “There is your luggage,” and they wanted D. Was up, high up and that took my whole luggage sit there, all of—all of the—all along—[unclear] along. Then came the man that was very nice. And he said, “You know, we need a—a taxi. He will ask you \$10 for the taxi but you give him only two. And they take you”—you know, I went with the bus to Florida. So—and he—he helping me put all the luggage in the—in—in the station wagon. And he said—he—he told him where I would like to go and he put all the—the luggage in the—in—in the bus station. And he said, “Well, \$10.” I said, “I have no \$10.” “Yeah, then give me five.” “No,” I said. “I have only four.” So I have made already [laughs] [unclear]. I give him the \$4, yeah. And he was not entitle— only for two, that man told me. But I have given him then four. Now, I said, but I was so hungry and so thirsty and they are sitting, four mens in a white shirt. I—I thought that was milkmen, you know. And I go in that [unclear]. I wears a fur coat and I put my coat, everything there and—and get a sandwich. And then when I came back he said, “You know, you are in New York. Never do that again, leave your things there. But we’ll keep an eye on it,” the four men. You know, wasn’t that sweet?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah. Then I went and met a bus.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: And then I'm sitting, have a very bad cold. And a young man sitting from my—side me. And I was so scared. I have o—only \$17, you know. And I didn't know what to do with him. And I didn't eat and drink nothing and that young man said to me, "You know, you didn't eat and drink nothing. Let's come—I—you get a breakfast now." He get me by the hand and—[chuckles]—

LEVINE: Wow.

ROMIREZ: —and off we went in the station. And he ordered for me a breakfast so fantastic [unclear] never in my life. Bacon, fried potatoes. Oh, that was a dish like that. And I ate everything. And he was smiling. "Now, you drink milk too." [laughter] Yeah, and then I show him my \$17 that he could pay for it. "No. I wish you good luck," and give [unclear] a kiss. On the next station, he get out. That was my first impression in America. Wasn't that beautiful?

LEVINE: Wonderful.

ROMIREZ: I don't know his name, was maybe 23, 24 years old, like that.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow.

ROMIREZ: [unclear].

LEVINE: Yeah. How—how do you feel now? Do you feel as though you are American and German? How do you think about—

ROMIREZ: No. I—

LEVINE: —yourself that way?

ROMIREZ: More an American. More. I did that so thrown over my shoulder the past, my whole past throw over my shoulder and start—even I was over 50.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: New.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: And that was [unclear]. Yeah. Oh, that was beautiful.

LEVINE: And have you gone back at all to Germany to visit?

ROMIREZ: Oh—oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, you have a brother.

ROMIREZ: Yeah, and I have to get my things in England. F—or six years I went. I have had up to four years already my little apartment.

LEVINE: Hmm, wow. Well, when you look back on your life, what—what would you say was a—a high—the high points for you?

ROMIREZ: When I saw the statue of freedom here. That was the highest.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah. This is—that is America. Yeah, my brother loves America, even—he lost everything to the American bomb. You know, and the [unclear] of our house and I saw my grandparent only the frame and one [unclear] looking [unclear]. And of course, I couldn't help crying. And my father said, "You know, you should be ashamed to cry. You can buy that all again. We are alive and healthy. From now on, every morning we [several words unclear]." That's what [unclear] soldier, you know. And for three-quarter a year, every morning [unclear] for the—the poor soldier. But it wasn't always possible but my father went over the corridor. I get a big basket with cigarettes and chocolate. And I went in to the soldier and give him cigarettes. And I—and then I remember that was a very small group, maybe 50 soldier in a dining room, small room. I go [unclear] dozens. And they're all have had no legs and no hands. The nurses [several words unclear] and that finished me. That finished me. That finished it. The doctor said, "You know, you have to stop that." [unclear], yeah. And they are looking so grateful and they are [unclear] and they couldn't [unclear]. Yeah. Then was other incident. I—I heard my father playing the [unclear] Handel. And I went there. The doctors all stood [unclear] the door. And a—a mother sitting on her son's bed—he was maybe 19 or 20 years old—with a little candle. And he asked—my father asked him what he would

like to [several words unclear] Handel. I have never heard my father so beautiful playing it then.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: Then he die. And that came to get [unclear] men without hands. I said, "I have to stop it." I couldn't—couldn't take it anymore.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: That was the worst part from all of them. Even the bombing was not a—that was bad, yeah, but that was the worst part. That, I must say. But I went through it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Look, I'm 84 years old now.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: When I play my big organ—I have a big organ and I have a piano.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. What is this period of your life like for you now?

ROMIREZ: Now?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Oh, I'm—I have wonderful friends here in America, very wonderful friends. But I live in a most wonderful home—house—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: —in the sixth floor, big balcony and there's the ocean.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMIREZ: You see? Oh, yeah. And my life is not dull.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: I have not a dull life. Never. Because of our—I'm making all the films for my husband. We went—a tour with him. So I'm [unclear]. I walked under—I was 74 years old. And then we went on a tour, went to France, Italian, and I filmed it. I have the film.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: First, the real film come out, then the video, that last 12 years. And I see them from time to time. I look at the—yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, nice.

ROMIREZ: On—but [unclear] me too, cutting them [unclear], you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. Oh, perhaps I should just ask you your husband's name. What—what was your—

ROMIREZ: Augustine.

LEVINE: Augustine.

ROMIREZ: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And you met him in this country?

ROMIREZ: Yeah, I met him.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: Yeah, and then I went to New Orleans. I living there in a—little bit longer than—in—in New Orleans. I love it in Orleans.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: A beautiful—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROMIREZ: —beautiful [unclear]. Oh, lovely.

LEVINE: Is that where you met him?

ROMIREZ: No.

LEVINE: No.

ROMIREZ: In—in Manhattan.

LEVINE: Oh, in Manhattan.

ROMIREZ: A very sick man.

LEVINE: Your husband was a very sick man?

ROMIREZ: Oh, yeah, a very sick man.

LEVINE: When—when you met him?

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMIREZ: And I—I [several words unclear]. He had the most wonderful family. And when I came back from New Orleans, he was so happy. And the family—I came [unclear] Christmas—invited me for Christmas. [sentence unclear]. They are almost all dead now. [breathes sharply] And so one day I said to him, “You know what? Let’s get married.” He never thought of it that I would say such a thing. I never thought that I would myself.

LEVINE: You said it?

ROMIREZ: I have said it. “Yeah,” he said. Oh—and then—and he was the happiest person. He even getting healthy. The doctor tell me three and a half to four years he have to live. I said, “The—the few years he had to live, that will be a paradise for him.” He lived 20 years and five months.

LEVINE: Wow.

ROMIREZ: And happy, very, very happy. He have—Elizabeth. She knows him too.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMIREZ: A very—was an optician.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMIREZ: But he have had a accident and could not anymore on work. But he was a very sick man, yeah. Heart and lung, always [unclear] water [unclear].

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMIREZ: I took care of him.

LEVINE: Wow.

ROMIREZ: Yeah, and especially when I retired, eh? I was.

LEVINE: Good.

ROMIREZ: [unclear]—

LEVINE: Now, is there anything else you can think of that you'd like to say before we close? Anything we maybe didn't—

ROMIREZ: Yes, I—one thing, yeah, that I'm very happy to be in America and that I follow my father's advice. I'm very, very happy. Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow.

ROMIREZ: So old I am, but you will be surprised what young friends I have. Yeah.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

ROMIREZ: Yeah, very, very happy, indeed.

LEVINE: Good.

ROMIREZ: I'm grateful. You know what I have said to some American. They look a little bit funny when I said it. I said, "You know, thanks to American bombs, lost my home. But they give it me back now where I needed it most."

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROMIREZ: "And I'm grateful for that."

LEVINE: Well, that's a beautiful place to end, I think. And I want to thank you so much for a most interesting interview.

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Thank you so much. I want to also say that we will try to get copies of your cassette tapes and keep them in—in the file with your name on it here at Ellis Island—

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: —of this—of the folksongs, the Russian folksongs, the German folksongs.

ROMIREZ: Y—yeah. Yeah, okay.

LEVINE: Th—that would be wonderful.

ROMIREZ: Oh, that I will do. Yeah?

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROMIREZ: And play it on the organ.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I've been speaking with Lelo Romirez, who came here to the United States from Germany in 1962 when she was 50 years of age.

ROMIREZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: And I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]