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ELIZABETH LEGA
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INTERVIEW DATE: DECEMBER 30, 1997
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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
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AGE: 21

SHIP: S.S. MUIR
PORT:
RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm here in the Oral History Studio at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum on December 30th, 1997. I'm with Elizabeth Lega, who came here from Germany in 1951 when she was just turned 21 years of age. And Mrs. Lega came on the S.S. Muir—M-U-I-R, which was an Army ship, under rather unusual circumstances. So let me start. If you could say at the beginning your maiden name and birth date.

LEGA: Okay. I was born in Cologne, near Cologne, little town called Beckladbach [PH] on October 27th, 1930. And right after I was born, my parents moved directly into the city of Cologne. And—

LEVINE: And then did you stay in Cologne up un—

LEGA: We—yeah, we stayed in Cologne and—until the war broke out. My father was drafted into the army. I believe it was 1940 or so. And he subsequently fought in Russia and he was very fortunate. He came back alive in one piece. He was wounded in Russia and they shipped him back

with one of the last flights out of Stalingrad. He was in the circle, which ultimately changed the war and turned the war around. That was that town, Stalingrad.

LEVINE: Oh.

LEGA: And he was wounded in the ankle and they flew him out with the plane next to the very last, and that's how he stayed alive. And then after that the whole town was eradicated. [sniffs] And the Germans lost—at that point, the Germans lost the war. And my—my mother had three brothers and my mother and the children. We lived in different areas of Cologne. To get away from the bombing, they shipped us into the middle of Saxony to a town outside of Torgo [PH] at the Alp [PH] River. And here again, that's an historic town. That is a town where the American troops met up with the Russian troops. This had been negotiated at that Malta Conference between Stalin and Roosevelt that set up. And that is where—that American troops were the first and they had to wait till the Russians tumbled up [chuckles] a week later. [sniffs]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: And it was farm country. There was no big bombing or anything like this. It went pretty peaceful. The only bad thing was that each Russian soldier got, like, three quarts of whiskey or some sorts to celebrate the end of the war. And they drank that and they went crazy and they raped everything in sight that they could, and it was very, very difficult for—to be a woman at that time. I was 11 at—no, 14 at the time and I think I was the only one in the village who hadn't been touched. They got a hold of my mother [sniffs] and I swore then that if I ever get a chance, if there was a war on this soil in America, I would pick up a rifle and shoot as many as I can. [sniffs] And I will do that [sniffs] because they messed her up terribly. So anyways—so but, otherwise, the war itself for me has not been that difficult. There were—I went to school. I went to secondary school where I started to learn English and that was a tremendous help for later coming to America. [sniffs] Because I was able to read and write but I wasn't able to talk. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh.

LEGA: You can think it first. [coughs] Excuse me. So there were indications during the war that what we were told by the authorities was not the whole truth and nothing but the truth. But when you're a child (like, the war started when I was 10), you don't really pay that much attention to it. [sniffs] And one of my favorite teachers disappeared one time. And she was one heck of a woman. She was not much to look at and she was terribly overweight. [sniffs] And she was in love with the Prince of Wales.

And everyday—almost everyday, at least twice a week, we would hear about the Prince of Wales. And she had met him once and that was her highlight in her life. And she also had the guts to stand in front of a classroom of, like, 30, 40 girls to complain about Hitler. [sniffs] And I thought that was terribly brave on her part. And she would come right out and say whatever she wanted to say. And—

LEVINE: Can you remember the things that she was saying at that time?

LEGA: Yeah, she would say that the Americans were right and Germany was wrong. The Nazis were wrong and that brought—I mean, we were, like, 10 and 12 and 13.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: You know. And we were uncomfortable at the time but we—we took it, you know, because we were glad somebody spoke up [unclear] was news, you know. Because everybody else says, "Hitler's doing is great. He's wonderful. He is this," and here is one single woman who has the nerve to speak up there in broad daylight, knowing that she can get shot the next day for it. And to speak up and say, "Well, here, this isn't so what they're saying." You know. [sniffs] And—

LEVINE: Were you hearing from your father a—at all when he was in the—in Russia in the army?

LEGA: Yeah, yeah. We would get mail. Every so often, we would get mail. So anyhow—

LEVINE: Was he feeling—

LEGA: —the teacher disappeared.

LEVINE: Ah.

LEGA: My father—no, my father was not a Nazi but he was—he was taken in by him also. [sniffs]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: And the reason for that was at the time before the war—this is what maybe a lot of people don't understand here. My father was a machinist by trade and he was, for four years, unemployed. He was out of work. And at that time there were, God knows how many, thousands of men out of work. My father wasn't the only one. [sniffs] And he had two children to support and a wife at that time. And Hitler, why he became so big so

fast, okay, like, my father was a very sane person and a very God-fearing person. He went to church. He believed in good and evil and he lived accordingly. But he didn't like it and he didn't like the Nazi Party. And buddies of—friends of his, they would join the Nazi Party, just to get work. [sniffs] And they kept dangling that in front of my father. After four years, they said, "If you join the party to—today, tomorrow you have a job." And that's—finally, after four years, he caved in and he joined the party. [sniffs] So—but he was never active in it, thank God. And that's how he became a soldier. He was drafted and went off to war. [sniffs] And during the war, my mother and the children, we had to fend for ourselves. There was nothing he could do, you know, and we didn't know what he was doing and he didn't know what we were doing. [sniffs] But my best friend—we would—I would drive. I would get into the city, like we were living in a village about 10 miles outside of the town of Torgo. And to get to school, to the secondary school, I had to go to train. And so right near train station was my best friend's house, and she lived there so we would walk together [sniffs] to the train and back from the train. And then one time, I had no idea she was Jewish. Nobody paid attention to this. I mean, nobody would say, "Gee, don't talk to her. She's Jewish," or, "Stay away from them because they're Jewish." Nobody made an issue of it. And nobody ever had a problem. You know? Especially as a girl or—or young person, who cares what religion you are? I liked you. You like me. That's all that matters. You know? [sniffs]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: And so one time—he father was a doctor and her name was Anna Marie. And she—one time, she said, "I'm not going to be here too much longer." And I said, "Why? Where are you going?" You know? And she said, "Well, we're expecting them to come and pick us up." I says, "Who? Who's going to come and pick you up?" She says [sniffs], "Well, the Nazis will come. The party will come. They will come and take us and ship us somewheres." I was so upset. I said, "They can't do this to you. Why would they do this? You haven't hurt anybody. You haven't done anything." [sniffs] She said, "No, but—but if you're Jewish." That was the first time that I heard that. I says, "You mean, they take you"—[coughs] excuse me [clears throat]—"they can take you away just because you're Jewish?" She said, "Yes. Don't you know that?" And I didn't know that. [sniffs] And this is what happened. And then after that, then maybe a week later, the house was empty. Nobody was there no more. Now, I don't know if they were really taken away or if they went voluntarily. But I think it was too late to go voluntarily at that time.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: I think they were taken away. [sniffs] And then, after a while, there were other people living in the house and that was the end of that. I never—never heard from her. [sniffs] And I was very, very upset so I went to my favorite teacher [sniffs] and spoke to her about it. And she took me aside and she says, "Well, that happens now all the time. You're better off not being friends with anybody who is Jewish because it—it will hurt you too much to—to lose them." That's what she said. And then all of a sudden, about, later, she was gone. [sniffs] So that was the—just before the end of the war.

LEVINE: Mmm.

LEGA: And so after there was so—I can really say that I did not have it that bad. You know, I had always enough to eat, sometimes not quite enough but there was always food. [sniffs] I was always warm. I cannot say that I really had a bad time of it. I mean, the bombs were falling and I almost got killed a couple of times. [chuckles] [sniffs]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: But that was nothing compared to what other people been through, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: In the whole—overall scheme of things. [sniffs] So after the war, as a child, when I was 10 my father had given me an accordian to play. [sniffs] And I learned how to play like a student, nothing special. You know, just back and forth. And then after the war, by sheer accident, I became a musician and it was sort of forced upon me. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. How so?

LEGA: Well, that's a—[chuckles] it's a funny story but it's true. In the apartment house where we lived, my—my father wasn't back yet. He was still—we didn't know if he was alive or prisoner or where he was, you know. That was in early 1946. And he—on the second floor lived a musician. He played violin and something else, a saxophone or whatever. And he played in a band. And the band played for the American troops [sniffs] for entertainment. And the band had an accordianist in it and the accordianist got sick. [sniffs] So they needed a body with an accordian. Didn't matter how good that body could play. You know, that didn't matter. [sniffs] But they had to have a person sitting there with an accordian. So the gentleman down below asked if I would come with him to play for one or two nights. [sniffs] So of course, I was 15. [unclear] wonderful! You know. I couldn't play, you know, like a schoolgirl. So I

went and I was fascinated with it. And they put me in front of the drums because you couldn't hear a thing. [laughter] And the whole brass section was all around me. They made noise. All you could see was that I was playing back and forth but you could not—you couldn't hear me. You know? [laughter] And then, so then there was a little shenanigans going on, which I was unaware of. At the end of the night, the bandleader gave me 50 marks. Now, he was getting a whole lot more for the other guy [sniffs] and which he put in his pocket. That was fine with me. And also, each band—band member got an American pack of cigarettes, of American cigarettes each night. [sniffs] And that is why everybody played. Money didn't mean nothing but for that one pack of cigarettes they played their hearts out the whole night, including me. [sniffs] So instead of playing for the band just two days, I wound up playing, like, a year. [sniffs] All right. In the meantime, school went out the window. That was the end of the school. [sniffs] So I never finished school but nobody—never hurt me that I didn't finish school. [chuckles] So—

LEVINE: And you started smoking cigarettes.

LEGA: Yes.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

LEGA: Yeah, basically what I did was every night on the way home—we had to walk because the streetcars didn't work right and so forth. You know, so you walked home. And they would pick us up in American—the truck, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: Troop truck. And every night there was a flat tire because the tires were bad and all, you know. So it was always three, four o'clock in the morning before we got home. On the way home, [sniffs] I would stop at the black market, take my pack of cigarettes and change it for food, for butter, for a pair of shoes for my brothers or for—for some bread or whatever. And that is how my—my parent—my mother and the children survived. Okay. So—and my mother did—she didn't help too much. [chuckles] But I didn't mind. It came time that I had to decide what to do with the school. I could not keep up both playing and go to school at eight o'clock in the morning. I just couldn't. [sniffs] I would sit in school at nine o'clock. My eyes would close up. [sniffs] And my mother made me do the decision, what I wanted to do. And she should have put her foot down and says, "Hey, school comes first." But she didn't do that. She was looking to get help too and I understood that. And I never regretted it.

LEVINE: Mmm.

LEGA: So that's how I started to play. Then by that time, I was bitten by the bug. [sniffs] And then I buckled down and got myself a good accordian teacher. And that's—I started to practice six and eight hours a day and really, really buckled down. [sniffs] And then I became accordianist, you know. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Right.

LEGA: So after about two years of that—and I was still playing, you know, but after about two years of intensive study, that's when I went on my own as a soloist in front of orchestras or in trios, you know. And that is how it started with me. [sniffs]

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEGA: So from about 1947 to '51, I traveled all over West Germany at the time and also into Switzerland, into France playing the accordian. And it was very good, mostly for the American authorities at the time. You know, for to entertain the troops. [sniffs] And they had—

LEVINE: What was it like entertaining the troops?

LEGA: It was wonderful, except one time I laid a big bomb and I never knew why. [laughs] The—I love to play Am—primarily, I was playing American music. That's all I was playing, yeah. [sniffs] And western music and blues and so forth, but one time—and the soldiers were so appreciative of—of anything from home. You know, so they would—they would go and when they went on furlough some of them would bring some music back. And they brought me the sheet music, like they had the Hit Parade things, you know, [coughs] the little magazines. And I learned from them. You know, or they would even sit there and sing it for me until I had it right. "No, no, no. You're going too fast. Slower, slower. Faster." You know. [chuckles] That's how I learned how to play American music. [sniffs] It was really nice. So during that time, I met several Jewish people, men who had survived the war. And so there were foreign people from Poland or even from Russia and different nationalities. And—but it didn't mean nothing to me. I was involved in my work and so forth and so on. And then through some mix up, I had some—I had no job. I was, like, for three months without work, no contract. Somebody, the agent, had slipped up, you know. [sniffs] And I was so tired by the time, I didn't really mind. I could use a rest, you know. I wasn't living at home anymore but, from the time I was like, 16, you know. And so this officer came to me, this one from the American authorities and they said, "Look, you could do us a favor." And I said, "Doing what?" You know. Normally, they would give me jobs, like, "This month you play over there. This—then you go to

Munich, you play there. Then you go to Nuremberg; you play there," and that sort of thing. And here, nobody had a job for me. Everything was booked and somebody had forgotten me, you know. So he said, "We have a camp where we have—where Jewish survivors of concentration camps prepare their immigration papers to either Israel or to Canada or to America. And we desperately need somebody who understands some English and who under—who can type a little bit and can prepare help to people, prepare the paperwork." [sniffs] And he said, "And mostly Jewish—Jewish survivors." And I looked at him. I said, "You know." I said, "I'm not Jewish." I said, "How is that? It's like rubbing salt into a wound." Said, "You can't send me there." No? And he said, "We don't have anybody else. Nobody can handle it. They all run away after a couple of days." And I said, "Well, what do those people do there? Why do they run away?" He says, "Nobody can handle it. Nobody can do it." And I said, "Well, it's"—anyway, I didn't want to do it either.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: And I said, "I'm not an office worker." But on the other hand, these same people had kept me alive in the—in the office, the American office. And I had the PX card. I had money. I had all the food I wanted. So I owed them something. So he said, "Look, it's only for four weeks." He said, "Why don't you go and help me out?" [sniffs] I said, "Okay. I go." So I went. Well, I had to go on a train and I wound up in Munich and then about 30 miles outside of Munich is a little town called Walfershausen [PH]. And right outside of Walfershausen they had a camp [sniffs], which are called Furenwalt [PH]. And that was a camp, like old army barracks. That's all it really was, army barracks. And they had collected about 4,000 survivors of concentration camps. Now, at that time, I had never met a survivor of a concentration camp. I mean, you hear about it. You saw the pictures. [sniffs] You knew what had happened [sniffs] but you had never really physically or personally met a survivor. Yeah? It's a big difference, if you read about it or you meet somebody. And I found that out in a hurry. So like I said, up to that time I was easy, c—come and go and never a problem and that sort of thing, you know. [sniffs] Pretty self-centered, you know, like every young girl is.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: And so I wound up in that camp and it was supposed to be a month. So the—they had a small room, like no bigger than this but it had two c—army cots in there, like kitty corner. And my roommate was a little girl. She was about 15 at the time and her name was Anna. And we became good friends. And I was very, very strange in that camp. My job was to help people fill out the paperwork. Yeah. Their name, their birthday and that sort of thing. And what happened [coughs], and same thing what

happened to all the other people who worked there and run away happened to me. It didn't take long. It took a couple of days only and I was—felt like running away but I didn't.

LEVINE: What was it that—

LEGA: What it—

LEVINE: —meeting survivors was like?

LEGA: What it was is you're sitting behind a little desk. And somebody walks in or shuffles in, very hesta—slowly. I don't want to use the word shuffle, but walking very slowly, unsure of themselves, come in. You have to stand in front of the desk, to stand. These are free people. They stand. This is four years after the war. This is four ye—this is what got me. Four to five years after. All right. Not right then and there. After. And they would stand in front of the desk and would say, "Please sit down." There was a chair. "Please sit down." They would sit down very slowly. Everything was in slow motion. So they sit down and then you had the questions, [coughs] where they were born, their name, their birthday and so forth and so on, [coughs] where they wanted to go. You know. And I would write it all on the paperwork and that was it. And they had to sign it later and the next one would come in. What it was, what gets to you in a situation like this is people were just like a shell. There was nothing inside. It was like you're seeing the outside of a body but there's nothing inside.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: There's no soul. There's nothing there. If somebody had gotten—somebody had marched in and pounded their hand on the table, says, "Hey. I have enough of paperwork. Get my papers going. Do it now! I want out of here." I would have appreciated that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: But nobody ever did. It was just like so much patience. And I would have never had that patience. And to top it off, they all knew the minute I opened my mouth, they knew that I was not Jewish.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEGA: So that was double it, you know. And it was like this with every single person. Nobody seemed to have a will anymore. Nobody seemed to have the gumption to just, "All right. It's done. It's over with. They didn't kill me. Now, I'm starting my new life. I'm back to my old self again." It wasn't like that. It was just like you had to take this person and sort of—

but like a child. You bring it one inch at a time into another phase, you know.

LEVINE: Mmm.

LEGA: [sniffs] And that is what gets to people. That's what got to me. All right. That was part of it. So I walked—I slept in the same camp. I mean, I had no special privileges or so. That wasn't that, "Here's staff and here are the people." It was not like that. So with my roommate [sniffs], and I got very heavily involved in her story and we became very, very good friends. [sniffs] And through her, I learned what a concentration camp really was like, what it was, through her.

LEVINE: Now, she had been in one?

LEGA: Yeah. She had been in one from the time she was—she was 15 at that time so she was 10 when the war ended. She said she was like three or four when she was—she came with her mother, you know, was then. [sniffs] Her mother wound up in a—in a gas chamber. Okay? Girl knew that. She would talk about it matter-of-factly, as it nothing ordinary happens. I would have been screaming on the top of my voice, you know. But she w—all the women in the camp were in the barracks where she was kept protected her. She was like the community child. And nobody did anything to her. [sniffs] They just did—I mean, the German authorities knew she was there but that even they didn't bother her. You know, they just did—she was protected. She—they killed her brother in front of her—of her eyes. There was apparently a fence and the brother was on the other side of the fence. And he was trying to give her some salt wrapped in paper. Salt. And apparently, salt was at a premium in a camp. I don't know, you know. [sniffs] And while he was giving that to her, a s—soldier—a German soldier came along and clapped him over the head with a rifle butt and killed him right then and there. She saw all that.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEGA: Now, if that little girl had gotten bitter and gotten up one night [sniffs] and slashed my throat, I would have understood, you know. But instead, we became the best of friends. So we were very, very close. So I was older than she was. You know, I was like 20—19 and a half, 20. But she was, like, 15 at the time. And her—the only thing she wanted out of life was to go to Israel and marry a nice boy and have a family. And she felt—because her whole family was dead so s—she said it was up to her to make a new family. [sniffs] And so that's all she wanted, you know. And I could understand that, you know. But what happened was they would—everybody would be examined once a month, x-rays and this and more

fingerprints. You know, before you can come to America you have to give them seven sets of fingerprints [sniffs], if not more, you know, and God knows how many x-rays. So if that time, if you had any kind of indication that you had TB, or even bronchial trouble, you could not come. America would not let you in. Neither would Israel. You were stuck in Germany. [sniffs] And so this is why all these exams were all the time, you know, the x-rays. And it was always fine. And then one day she came back from the exam and she was positive for TB. Now, they wouldn't let you out of the country or into another country, even if you never had TB. You could be negative. But if you have, apparently, pneumonia, that leaves a shadow on the lung or something like that. And that is enough to keep you from immigrating. So she had something on her lung. And that very same day, she had to leave the camp and go to a sanatorium. And that is when I broke. That's when I broke. [sniffs] And [voice breaking] it was just so unfair to know that this girl was the only one left and she couldn't go to Israel. So anyway, I didn't even know where she was. All I know is the nurse came and they took her away in the car and that was it. And they took good care of her, you know, but she could not go to Israel. [sniffs] She could not start a family. So that is when I—I flipped out. I was screaming. I—I—I thought I had a nervous—maybe I did have a nervous breakdown; I don't know. [sniffs] Anyhow, I ran out and I ran to the—the man who ran that camp. He was some sort of America—but he wasn't American but he was [unclear] America. And I screamed at him. I yelled at him. And all my screaming and crying [several words unclear]. And he said, "First of all, calm down." [sniffs] He even gave me a shot of whiskey to calm me down. [chuckles] I never forget, the first glass of whiskey, never had whiskey before, you know. [chuckles] And here I'm choking and sputtering and [unclear]. [blows nose] And I said to him. I said, "I want out of this camp." I said, "I'm going to go to America. I don't want nothing to do the Germans. I want out of here." And he said, "Well, calm down. Calm down. Calm down." He said, "You can't go to America. You need a sponsor. You're not Jewish." I said, "I don't care what I am. I just want out of here." You know. And he says, "Well, you go back now and you sleep." [sniffs] He gave me another shot of whiskey [chuckles] and made sure I would sleep, I guess. [sniffs] "And you—if you still feel that way in the morning, you come back in the morning." [sniffs] And I did. I did. [sniffs] I was there in front of his office before he even got there. And he explained to me that, in order to leave Germany, I had to give up my German citizenship. I was a displaced person, just like all the other people, no country. [sniffs] And then I could leave with them, you know? So that is what I was going to do. So then I started to make my own papers. I said, "I don't care how you do it. Just do it." You know? [sniffs] And that is what we did. In the meantime, I had met a man in Frankfurt, [sniffs] also a displaced person. His family had died in Warsaw, all except three brothers. And we met again in that camp while I was doing my paperwork. We met again there, and maybe because I had met

him earlier or whatever. Anyhow, we started to go together and we fell in love. And then we got married there and we got married by the mayor in the next village. He married us. It was all secretive because my parents couldn't know about it. [sniffs] And God forbid, if I marry a Jewish man on top of everything else, you know. [sniffs] And then, plus, a foreigner. He didn't even have a country, never mind money. He didn't even have a country. So that's what I did. And then we came together here. We got on that ship. [sniffs] I had $10 and I think he had another 10 hidden in the tie, because you're not allowed to bring money, [chuckles] you know. So, and that is how we got here. And the men would be on one end of the ship and the women on the other side. [sniffs] So—

LEVINE: Why don't you say something about this particular ship that you took?

LEGA: Well, it was a troop ship. I mean where American soldiers would be ch—chauffeured back and forth, four bunks high. They gave you a couple of blankets and so it wasn't very comfortable. You didn't have a cabin or a shower or anything like that, you know. But you know, you don't really remember that. I mean, all you want to do is get out and get going, you know, and it doesn't matter how you go. I would have walked across the water if—if I had to. I would have walked. [sniffs] It didn't matter to me how. I was never homesick. So the night we got into the harbor here—it took about 10, 12 days, I think, for the ship to come here [sniffs], and I spent a lot of time on deck, up on deck, was icy cold. But you're not supposed to—have to dock to be on deck but then they—they left me alone, you know. [sniffs] And also, I played accordian there too on—on the ship, you know. And, you know, dining room and so forth. So anyway, the—the night we got into the harbor here the ship couldn't dock or whatever. We had to sit outside somewheres. And I—I swear, there were 1,100 people on that boat and, I swear, they must have all been on that one side. [sniffs] And we sat there. It was raining. It was, like, drizzling. It was cold. It was nasty. [sniffs] And we all sat there silently. You didn't hear a pin drop. We all—we sat there and stared at the Statue of Liberty, every one of us. You know. I still get choked up when I think about it. And you just sat there and looked, you know. [sniffs] [voice breaking] It's a—it's just fantastic. I—I can't describe how it is when you come and what you—you look at that statue. It's more than just a statue. It's like saying, "Look, you're going to be all right now." You know, it's not—it's a funny feeling. I can't describe it. And I thought I was the only one who was affected by it. But it happened to Lelo [PH] too. So it means it happens to everybody. It happens to other people too. That is what it means, you know. So that is how it started. And my first job here was [sniffs] three days in the country, and a lady came and picked us up from the boat. And they had rented us a—a little furnished room [blows nose] in Jersey City. And at that stage in life, you don't ask any

questions. You just go. They say, “You go there. You go there. You go there. You go there.”

LEVINE: Okay. We’re going to pause here just for a second so Kevin can turn the tape. And then we’ll continue.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEGA: But they have never come here. They never come here.

LEVINE: Okay. We’re beginning now on side B of Elizabeth Lega’s story about coming to America. [clears throat] Okay. So you were—you were saying you went three days in the country when you first got here.

LEGA: Yeah. I got my first job after three days. The lady would come. Her name was Bennem [PH], Mrs. Bennem. She was a volunteer to help new refugees get organized. So she took me to a Social Security office to get a Social Security card. [sniffs] And before you emigrate in Europe, they drum it into your head, “Never, ever sign anything unless you know exactly what you’re signing.” At that time, there was a thing to the McCarty [PH] area and so forth. [sniffs] And they explained to us it could be a communistic-involved party, and you could sign up without realizing what you were doing. [sniffs] So here at nine o’clock in the morning on a dreary, winter [unclear] day, I made that poor lady in the Social Security office explain the entire Social Security system to me. [laughs] You know, why and how and what, you know. And finally, she said, “Well, Roosevelt did this, put it in.” I said, “No wonder. No way. I don’t want nothing to do with Roosevelt.” [laughs] You know, and that sort of thing. But anyhow, they explained it to me and then I got the card and then I got a job then.

LEVINE: [chuckles] What was your association with Roosevelt at that time when you were first coming here?

LEGA: Well, Roosevelt at the time—no, he was dead by that time but, to me, he was like the one who had the—did the war. I mean, he was the leader of America at the time and he was—he was responsible for the war. You know. We didn’t know nothing about Congress or anything like this, you know. And then, how—how stupid people can be, or how I was anyway, when he died in April there of ’45—I think it was ’45, right? We were actually glad he had died because we thought that was the end of the war, you know. I mean, you don’t realize it wasn’t just one person who made the war, you know. [chuckles] [sniffs] But you don’t know that and you don’t get told. They don’t explain to you in a—in a country at war

what the other parties are doing and why and how, you know. So this is—but my experience in that camp is—this is what shaped my entire life after that. [sniffs] If it hadn't been for that, especially with Anna, I would have never been here. I would have never met my husband, would have never married him, [sniffs] and I shouldn't have married him because the marriage did not last. We stayed together about four, five years here. And I had a child, a boy, by the name of Mark. [sniffs] And—but I was not ready to be the wife he should have had. [sniffs] Now, here you had a man who survived the war. He had a bunch of problems, psychological problems because he—there were three—there were actually nine in the family and only three survived. [sniffs] And the parents made the three brothers leave the Warsaw ghetto. The boys didn't want to go but they pushed them out [sniffs] in order to stay alive. And that—did stay alive. They wound up in Russia when they left the Warsaw ghetto and they were imprisoned in Russia and very much abused. My husband didn't have any teeth in his mouth. He had all gold teeth, they gave him. And he could not—the other two brothers also survived. So the three who had gone out of Warsaw survived. And he could not cope with that. He could not cope with that his family was dead and he was alive. And I was too young. He was, like, 10 years older than I was. I was too young and too stupid to handle it properly. I—I couldn't do it, you know. [sniffs] And at that time, we had no money, you know. We couldn't go to a psychiatrist or to psychologist and nobody was there to help. There would most likely would have been a million people who would—glad to be helping him, but I didn't know about that, you know. I worked in a factory for minimum—well, like, a dollar—my first job was for 97 cents an hour in the [unclear] company packing toothbrushes, you know. [sniffs] And I could not help him and I didn't know how. He should have never married a German woman at the time.

LEVINE: Why do you think he married a German woman?

LEGA: I don't know. We fell in love.

LEVINE: Mmm.

LEGA: And it doesn't matter. When you fall in love, it doesn't matter if you—what you are, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: And this is what happened. I was helter skelter in love with him and he with me. But daily living was different. You know, holidays were different. I didn't know. [sniffs] I didn't know what a menorah was. I didn't know what it meant, Shabbos. I—I didn't know what it meant, you know. I couldn't live that—and he didn't know my holidays. And it was just—it just

wasn't meant to be. And I think we still cared for one another but we just couldn't—he couldn't cope. He could not cope.

LEVINE: Well, you couldn't overcome everything that had happened.

LEGA: Yeah, he—he—I could not help him, what happened through the war. And I should have—if I had been older, maybe I could have. You know, but I couldn't do it at the time. So he decided [sniffs] he wanted to go back to Germany, because he had a brother over there. Again, one of the brothers wound up with TB and had to be there. [sniffs] He could never get out of Germany. So he—my husband went back to Germany. [sniffs] And I—my boy at the time was 11 months old and I wanted him to be an American and stay here. [sniffs] So I went on my own.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEGA: I had no money but I went on my own with the boy. [sniffs] And today, he's lung specialist, you know. So that's what happened. But it wasn't easy but what has been accomplished here I could only do in this country. I could have never done it anywheres else.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEGA: Never. [sniffs] You know, and la—much, much later I met somebody who also was [sniffs] in that same camp, you know. And they told me that Anna had made it to Israel. She did go there. She did make it there [voice breaking] [sniffs] and she has a family.

LEVINE: She—

LEGA: Yeah.

LEVINE: She made it to Israel.

LEGA: She made it, yeah.

LEVINE: Ah.

LEGA: So—and that was it and I'm—but—

LEVINE: Have you ever corresponded or [unclear]—

LEGA: I sent her—somebody sent me an address and I sent a couple of letters out and once, I got a postcard. But that was the end of it and then I never heard no more.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: You know.

LEVINE: But you knew she was safe.

LEGA: As long as she was—that's what she wanted to do and she had a family, you know. I knew that. I knew she had a couple children. But unfortunately, never heard after that so, you know. But she made it. She got her wish, you know.

LEVINE: Mmm. And what was your husband's name?

LEGA: Abram.

LEVINE: Abram.

LEGA: Gorin—G-O-R-I-N.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LEGA: You know. [sniffs]

LEVINE: And what—what—what—what was it like? I mean, you became so close with your roommate—

LEGA: Yeah.

LEVINE: —and ev—what was it like during those horrific times when everything was—

LEGA: You mean in the camp?

LEVINE: —topsy-turvy and—and I mean, just human relating? Was it different in the—in—in—in such unusual—

LEGA: Yeah.

LEVINE: —circumstances? How was it different?

LEGA: Well, [sighs] what happened to me actually is what—what made it different. I think the people there themselves—everybody sort of looked out for themselves a little bit. But it doesn't mean that they would not help you if you needed it. Okay. But what happened to me, that's the—the craziest part, I was so filled with guilt during that time of what Germany had done to the Jewish people, okay. [sniffs] Here you are, you're—

you're taught from day one, from—practically from the day you're born that you're supposed to be proud of your heritage and, "Oh, Germany is this," and, "Germany is that." "And here is good. You have [unclear] and you have a wonderful cultural heritage." And, oh, God, you know. You're sitting on top of a mountain, you know. Nobody else is as good as you, you know. That is what is implied. Maybe every country does it [chuckles] to their children. I don't know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: But so and then you hear—and you're filled up with that, you know, [sniffs] and all the propaganda and all this and that during the war. You know, you never heard anything negative, of course. So and then you see what this so-called cultural country can do to other people, to another nation just for stupid religion, all right. Just because somebody has a different religion, they get killed. They get torn apart. I mean, you can't live with yourself. I couldn't. I said, "You're supposed to be part of your country and yet, these very same people go and kill innocent women and children, and men too all over religion. I—I just couldn't comprehend this. And I felt so ashamed and so guilty. And I wasn't the only one. This was my age group. They all felt that way. They—we all felt the same way. You know? Said, "How could our parents sit still for that? How could our grandparents allow this to happen? Why didn't anybody do something? How could this have happened?" You know. [sniffs] And there is no answer. Nobody—and that is why I resent Germany so much at that time and even now. Nobody stood up and said, "Yes, I was part of this monstrous thing. I did these things too. I'm sorry I did them. What can I do to help and be good a little bit at least?" Nobody said it. Everybody looked the other way and said, "Well, I didn't do it. He did. He"—the next one said, "I didn't do it. This one did." Then th—they said, "Well, I didn't do that either but I followed orders." Everything was orders. Not one person stood up and said, "I'm sorry for what I did." Not one person. And that all works on you. You know, that all, all works on you. And I was walking through that camp and, if the people—like I said, I felt so guilty and bitter. I felt guilty for being German. I felt guilty for being German and ashamed, so ashamed. And I was—I wasn't even 20 yet, you know. And if the Jewish people had thrown stones at me or spit on me or called me bad names, I would have felt so much better. I would have felt so much better, said, "Go get it out of your system. Do something. Hit me. Do something. Curse me. I don't care. Somebody has to take something." You know. There should be an even exchange. You know, you hit me; I hit you back. But they didn't do that. They didn't do that. What they did was they taught me how to speak Jewish. They taught me how to cook Jewish. All right? To this day, I can take a live carp and make gefilte fish from it. To this day. All right. That's what I learned there.

LEVINE: In the camp?

LEGA: In the camp. In the camp. A—a little boy next door—like I said, the walls are like paper, you know, in an army barracks. [sniffs] There was a young couple next door. They had a little boy, about two or three. And I forgot his name. But he would love to come into my room, I think just to get away from the parents. [sniffs] And we had, like, a little cook plate in there, like [unclear], some sort of, like, thing like, you know. [sniffs] But the minute I rat—rattled the pot over the cup, they would come and yank him out. [laughs] They were kosher, you know. But I didn't know it at the time. [chuckles] So poor thing was hungry, you know, so I wanted to give him something to eat. Whatever I had was shared, you know. And they said, "You can't give him nothing to eat. He can come but don't feed him." I says, "Well, why not?" You know. "We can't—you cook different." [laughs] You know. So, I mean, they explained things to me. But if somebody had got so I didn't feed him anymore, [chuckles] you know. But things like that. But like I said, if the people had thrown stones at me or so, I would have felt better.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEGA: So that was all leading up to it, you know. And you learn. You learn to be a human being. And if you don't, then you're not good for anything after that. You're just no good.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: You know, and that is what happened to me. So I could not stay in Germany. I would—I wanted out in the worst way and I just couldn't handle it. [sniffs] And I came here and it took me 35 years—I didn't want to go back. I was so spiteful, so bitter of Germany, which isn't right but that's the way I was. I [sighs] did not teach my children any German. To this day, they don't speak a word of German. [sniffs] And I did not want to go back. My mother came to visit me here. My father came to visit me. But I did not want to go back. And then finally, my mother said, "Well, don't wait till I'm six foot under," and that sort of thing. And after 35 years, I went back over there for two weeks and I came back after one week. [sniffs] I didn't even made the two weeks out and that was it. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: So—

LEVINE: How about your relationship with your parents? Did you—did you reconcile—

LEGA: We reconciled—first, of course, they were very upset that I had not only left Germany but that I had committed the tragic sin of marrying a Jewish man. But they got over that too, you know. [sniffs] And I wouldn't have cared anyway. You know, I mean, you know, so—and I was far too independent but at—at that time, the war, you grow up in a hurry and you make up your own set of rules. [sniffs] And sad to say that by the time you're 15 you make your own set of rules, you know. But that is the monster. [sniffs] And if you don't, then you don't survive. Then you don't survive. You have to. In order to survive, you have to go and make up your mind and be counted and do whatever you feel is right. And that is what I did, you know. [sniffs] So nobody really give a damn after that point, from the time the war ended, what was going to happen to me. It was up to me. If I was going to make something out of myself, that was fine. If I went down the drain, oh, that was fine too. You know, I mean, it—my parents were not bad people but it's just—in times like that everybody sort of is so preoccupied with the necessities, with everyday living from one—to stay alive from one day to the next. You don't really have room or the oversight to worry about somebody else, even if it's your own child. It's diff—I mean, here in this country you can't maybe understand this. [sniffs] But my father, for instance, when he came back from prisoner of war ship, he couldn't—he had to worry about his own job, to get a job, to feed his family. He couldn't worry what I was thinking in my head. He had no time for that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: You know?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: He could not reach out to give me support. I mean, emotional support. Neither could my mother. They just couldn't, you know. And [coughs] so you learn to be very independent, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: And that—that, in turn, you grow up too fast. That is the legacy of any war in any country with any child. You are not a child any longer. You grow up too fast. You see too much. You hear too much. And that goes for every child. It's not just—not just in Germany. It's with every war.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

LEGA: You go to any country where there's a war, has been a war and the children are not children anymore.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEGA: No.

LEVINE: What do you think the ramifications of that are, that, you know, that you really missed being a child in some sense? And—and as—as an adult and as a person since that time, did—did—has that had its effects—

LEGA: Yes.

LEVINE: —on you?

LEGA: You get too serious. Maybe you forget how to laugh sometimes. I'm far too serious. You know? And I know that but there's not much you can do about it. And if you're not very careful, you can pass it onto your own children. And that is not good. You know, you have to be more open and so forth, you know. So—and here again, I married later. I met another man here and I got married again. [sniffs] First of all, we got the divorce and then, five, six years later, I met this man, got married and I had two more boys. So, and then he died of lung cancer later on. But anyway, [sniffs] the—then I had to fend for myself. And you have a tendency to be too serious then. But I have—there was nobody there to help me either, you know. But it makes you grow up and you're more serious and you maybe get more accomplished, and you're more set in your ways. And you're more—you learn how to look at the overall picture. The little things don't bother you anymore as much.

LEVINE: Oh.

LEGA: You know, you couldn't care less about certain things. You look at the overall picture. [sniffs] If you step on my feet now, so what? So you stepped on my feet. I don't have to punch you out for that. [chuckles] You know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: I said, Jeez, that she should have watched where she was going. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: You know, that sort of feeling. You know, you get a little bit more broad-minded.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: You look at other people and you see how you can help them instead a bypassing them. You know, like I said, it's part of being a human being, becoming a human being.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: And in—in a war, you either become a human being or after a war, or you turn the other—other s—other—other way, you know. And I wanted to become a human being. So, and I've been living ever since then. And I see something which is wrong, I speak up. [sniffs] I can be a holy terror, you know, and I don't mind. I'm not afraid to speak up. I don't care what happens. I speak up. I will never be a silent majority. Never. And I have almost gotten myself killed that way. [laughs] But I cannot keep quiet anymore.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEGA: If I see an injustice, I speak up. I stop it. I speak up. And I learned that much. And if I can help anybody—I don't care who it is—I'll do as much as I can to help, whether it is with money or—I don't have much money, but whether it's with money or with food or with clothing [sniffs], or just with a little emotional support sometimes. Just take somebody by the hand and say, "Hey, look. You're not alone. Somebody is there to help you. Somebody is there to pay attention to you." That's sometimes all that needed, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

LEGA: And that is what you learn and I learned that in that camp.

LEVINE: What do you think is—is different with the—with the Jewish people who had come from the concentration camps, who you saw so f—up close right afterwards? Wh—what do you think they learned? Do you have any sense of that?

LEGA: Not really. I don't know. I—I think they learned that, no matter what people can do to them, they can survive.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEGA: I think that Judaism, like over the years, have always been persecuted. Always. And somehow, they survived. And I think it made them stronger.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEGA: I hope so, at least. I really hope so, that, you know—and that they will carry it on and—with their children. It's wonderful, the programs you are doing here, even for the children of Jewish survivors. A lot of them that you read in here, a lot of them say, "Well, I don't want to hear that old thing again. Not—we got to forget about it," you know.

LEVINE: [clears throat]

LEGA: Children don't really want to hear about it. They don't—like my sons even say, "Oh, that's war story, number 46, you know, or number 41 or war story, number 32," you know. [sniffs] And my own children used to do that because sometimes you—you come out with things, you know. But they used to [unclear]. They don't want to hear that. But now, the funny thing happens. As they get older—my oldest one—a—all three of them, rather, bought, for my birthday, bought a video camera. And I'm supposed to sit in front of it and tell my life story. And my oldest one said, "Well, we want to hear your war stories, your number 4 story, number 45 and 41." [chuckles] See, 10 years ago, said, "Oh, my God! Not again." Now, they want to hear it on film, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LEGA: So it is good that it is there. It is good that it is there.

LEVINE: Yes.

LEGA: And I think it should—it should be preserved and it should be there. And there's a lot of things what I don't agree with, like I can't understand that the Nazi Party can be flourishing here in this country. I cannot understand this. Things like that and people are saying now that the whole Holocaust business never happened. I mean, somebody has to be there and say, "Yes, it did happen. Yes, it was." I mean, you know, so this is very important what you're doing.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: This is very important. And I think the Jewish people, the survivors, a lot of them—some people did not make it afterwards. They could not cope with it. They did not make a go of it here in this country. But most of them did, you know, and they became some very, very good people. And not only—I don't mean in monetary ways. That too, most likely, but primarily inside, that again, they look at life differently than other people with—have a bigger goal. And they say, "Well, I'm survived for a reason. God kept me alive." And I'm sure that's what happened. You know, I'm sure that's what happened.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEGA: So, and they teach their children and, hopefully, these children, they will keep it all going. But maybe not when they're younger but when they are older, they got some more brains and they understand.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: You know.

LEVINE: Let me just ask a few questions. Your second husband, what was his name?

LEGA: His was Nicolas Lega—L-E-G-A. Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And your—your two—your two later sons? Your two second—

LEGA: One is Jeffrey, George Jeffrey, and the youngest one is Gregory.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: And the oldest one, Mark, is now a lung specialist. And the second one, by training, he's a photographer but he has a store and he's doing very well. And the third one is—he works for Coca-Cola but he has a degree in business, and he also has a real estate license, a—a—appraiser license. I have a real estate office and too, I've done very well. And we're open seven days a week and about 20 houses a day. [chuckles] You know, not anymore though, but in the beginning. I wanted to get them through college. And I could have never achieved what I have done here in Europe. Never. Never in a million years. [sniffs] So I—I look back. I—I'm a citizen. I became a citizen the first chance I had. And I would never turn the clock back.

LEVINE: Why—why do you say you could never have done it there?

LEGA: In Europe?

LEVINE: Yeah.

LEGA: No. You have—like in India, you have sort of a caste system there too, not quite as in India but you have [sniffs]—if your father's a carpenter, you going to be a carpenter.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: Yeah. My father would have been perfectly happy if I had learned to be a shop girl in a store and be a—a—you know, a salesperson in a store. That was all, especially—to this day, women don't have to learn as much as men. That—that attitude is still there, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: [sniffs] And I wouldn't have been satisfied with that, you know. I wouldn't have been. I wanted a little bit more out of life. What I wanted, I didn't know. [chuckles] You know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: But all I know is that I wanted out of Germany and I would never go back, would never, never go back.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEGA: So was very, very good thing that I was allowed to come here. Very, very—very, very good for me. Wasn't easy. It wasn't easy, by no means.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: But I would not turn the clock back.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: You know, and I met some very nice people along the way and good people, decent people, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: So—

LEVINE: And what—it—this is a sort of funny question, but did you have any heroes in your life, besides—besides the teacher who stood up and—and—and spoke against the Nazis? S—other people, either famous people that you didn't know firsthand or other people that you did know.

LEGA: My grandmother.

LEVINE: What was she like and why did you—

LEGA: Oh, you would have loved her.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

LEGA: She was a rebel. She was Rebel Number 1. She could have us all gotten killed and we didn't know it. My grandparents lived about a hundred kilometers outside of Cologne in little village. And my grandfather was the mayor, right, during the war. And it seems that my grandmother was involved with some people [sniffs] that I called the underground. [chuckles] I never knew in that village they had an underground. [chuckles] But apparently, she was the person in the underground in that village but nobody knew about it, not even my grandfather. And after the war it came out that she had actually taken one night two Canadian pilots [sniffs] and hid them in our basement for two weeks and sheltered them there and then passed them on to somebody else in the network. And if they had found these men in the house, we would have all been shot at sunrise, all of us in the house, children or—but what—and that came out after the war and nobody knew about it. [sniffs] And I was there. I spent a lot of time with her and cutting potatoes. I'll never forget it. I was peeling potatoes. [sniffs] And there was a knock on the door and in the door—my grandmother was in the room too in the kitchen. [sniffs] And in the door stood a big, lanky, tall guy. I was—to me, it seemed like he was never ending, you know. [sniffs] Nice-looking young man. I never saw him before. Nicely dressed. And he stood there and he had to duck because the—the ceiling was low. And he saw my grandmother. He runs, like, two, three steps in, picks her up—

LEVINE: [chuckles]

LEGA: —swings her around. And [unclear] and she is grinning and he is laughing. And she is grinning and he's kissing her and she's kissing him. I never saw him before, turn and look and I'm sitting there [unclear]. [laughter] And turns out to be he was one of the fliers. And one of—two fliers had been brought to her and one had a broken arm. She even got a doctor, you know, to set it. So what happened was down—it was an old farmhouse, like. And underneath the kitchen was a basement, like an ol—old-fashioned basement. [sniffs] But next to the basement in the open was like a stable, which was attached to the house but separate, you know. [sniffs] And there were goats in there. And that's where the fliers were with the goats. You know. [chuckles] And [unclear] didn't know it. All I knew is that one day I was not allowed to go in the basement anymore, ever. So that was it. And I couldn't figure out, 'Why can't I go in the basement?' You know. And couldn't go in the basement no more. And they made sure I didn't go in the basement. So every night my grandmother would go down when everybody was asleep and let them out of the stall so they could walk around the basement and stretch their legs and give them food. And they had to go back to the goats. And for two weeks. And that came out afterwards. So then she got some sort

of a plaque from—from the Canadian government or something from them.

LEVINE: Oh.

LEGA: And my grandfather, he—I—I swear, he got gray hairs over that afterwards, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: And especially when—I [unclear] a lot like her. When I feel I'm doing something right, I don't give a darn or anything. If it's my life involved or not, I couldn't care less, you know.

LEVINE: Now, did your grand—was your grandmother alive to know that you—

LEGA: [unclear]

LEVINE: —married a Jewish man?

LEGA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LEGA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: She took it in stride. She was the only person I said goodbye to in Germany. And to her credit—my father was her son, and he was God as far as she was concerned. He could do no wrong, you know. [sniffs] He could do no wrong. She spoiled him rotten. She really spoiled him rotten. But I told her I was coming to America. I told her I had married or would marry. [sniffs] And she kept her mouth shut. And I'm—I swore her. I said, "Don't say anything." And she promised and she never did.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: She never—but I never saw her alive again. I had promised her that I would come back after five years and she died just before that.

LEVINE: Oh.

LEGA: So—

LEVINE: Well, what was her name?

LEGA: Her name was Elizabeth.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEGA: When I was born, the two grandmothers got into a fight. My parents had picked a different name for me but they—one grandmother's was Elizabeth. The other one was Helen. So I got the both names from them.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

LEGA: That's how it happened. [laughter] But she shaped my life a lot.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: She really did. And there were some other people too. But she was the number one, really, that I'm very much like her.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well—

LEGA: Not always right. God, I have a hard—I can't—I can't [unclear] to a wall. But once there's something in there, it will be done. And like I said, I cannot take an injustice from anybody. If I see something, I—

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEGA: Somebody is going to hurt me, it will hurt me. I know that but I don't care.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEGA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And how about Ellis Island? Do you have any memories of Ellis Island, per se?

LEGA: Do. Here, it's—the fighting started right in this hall. [chuckles] See, you know, it was funny. Then we got into the hall here but it wasn't just—right now in the pictures you have all these—like these pipes, you know, where people walk through.

LEVINE: Right.

LEGA: But there was water in pipes. There was like a cloth also or something. It was a—it seemed like there was cloth in between. [sniffs] I don't remember all those pipes. But it looked like stalls, like—like you went—maybe I'm wrong but—

LEVINE: More partitions.

LEGA: Yes.

LEVINE: Full partitions.

LEGA: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LEGA: Yeah. It was like something dark on the sides in between, you know. And you walked through them. But the whole—the whole room was pitch dark. I mean, everything was very dark in there. There was no light [sniffs] unless it was—because it was December 10th. It was dreary or could be—I don't know. But all the people before me and around me, they were all gaunt, thin. [sniffs] And here I came, round-faced, rosy cheeks. I had been sitting upstairs on deck so much, you know, with the air and all. [sniffs] And I must have really been very rosy. And I know I was. Anyway, I stood before this man in this uniform and he looked at me, and he looked at the paper, looked at me. He looked at me and looked at the other, looked at me. And I—I was very uncomfortable. And I looked at him and said, "Something wrong?" "No, no, no." [laughs] I mean, he made me nervous, you know.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

LEGA: And my husband was behind me, pulling on me on m—on my arm or something, you know. [chuckles] [sniffs] But he—I mean, I looked so different from them, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

LEGA: So—

LEVINE: Okay. I think we have to stop here. We just reached the end of the tape.

LEGA: Okay.

LEVINE: And I want to thank you very much.

LEGA: You're welcome.

LEVINE: Elizabeth Lega, wonderful, fabulous—

LEGA: Yeah.

LEVINE: —asset to this whole collection.

LEGA: I had a good life.

LEVINE: I appreciate being with you.

LEGA: Thank you.

LEVINE: Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW]