

EI-989

BELLE MARKOVITZ KRANTZ

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is March 28, 1998 and I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Mrs. Belle Krantz, who came from White Russia in 1921 at the age of seven years. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I want to say I'm delighted that we're having a chance to do this interview because you're visiting the museum today. And I know this is going to be a real asset to our archive. So if we could start, if you would say your birth date again and where in Russia you were born.

KRANTZ: I was born on February 28th, 1914 and I came from a small country town, not really a village but a little country town. And it was called Mulivare Gubernia [PH]. Gubernia is like a county and we were probably about 200 miles from a large city, Gomel [PH], in that area.

LEVINE: And what was your father's name?

KRANTZ: My father was Samuel Markovitz.

LEVINE: And your mother?

KRANTZ: Was Anna Markovitz.

LEVINE: Do you recall her maiden name?

KRANTZ: I just can't bring it to my mind right at the—right at the moment—

LEVINE: Okay. If you think of it you can say it. Otherwise, you could send it or whatever. Okay. How about brothers and sisters? Did you have any in Russia?

KRANTZ: Yes, I was the youngest of three girls. The eldest was 10 and a half. And then my sister, second sister, was nine—nine years old. And—

LEVINE: And their names? What was their names?

KRANTZ: My eldest sister was Rebecca.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: She's now deceased. My second sister was Sara and then we ha—I have a brother who was—had a brother who was born in this country. And his name was Meyer—M-E-Y-E-R.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Okay. Well, [clears throat] now, did you have grandparents that you remember from Russia?

KRANTZ: Yes. Well, I don't remember my mother's grandparents. We didn't see them as often. My grandpar—my father's parents—

LEVINE: Parents.

KRANTZ: —lived with us for some time. And we brought his mother, my grandmother, to R—to United States with us. He died in Russia.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. I see. Do you remember any experiences with your grandmother in Russia—

KRANTZ: Well—

LEVINE: —before you—

KRANTZ: Ah—

LEVINE: —left?

KRANTZ: My grandmother and grandfather came to live with us when my father left for the United States, which was 1914. I was born about a month after he left. And they helped take care of us. My mother had had typhoid fever and, although, as a Jewess, it was very difficult for find—for her to find work, she finally worked in a typhoid hospital. That was essential because when my father left the war hadn't broken out. But soon after it did so he was not able to send us any money.

LEVINE: Hmm. Do you re—was that a typhoid epidemic at the time? Do you—

KRANTZ: I don't think so but it wasn't as—it was much more common than it was in later years—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: —for people to have typhoid fever.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that? About the typhoid in—

KRANTZ: I don't remember about the typhoid but I myself had serious illness when I was three years old. And I was—I had scarlet fever, diphtheria together, which left a mark in one of my eyes, which caused a lot of trouble at Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Well, we'll come to that. Tell me about your father. What did he do for work before he left?

KRANTZ: My father actually—my father was a very strong socialist, a very Zion—strong Zionist. And he thought that the overthrow of the czars would be the best thing for everyone. But the Bolsheviks weren't any better than the czars. He taught Jewish children, tutored, actually, Jewish children. And he also had a job as a—an overseer of a forestry for a poritz [PH] who was us—raising w—trees, lumber to have—to send lumber. And he overs—oversaw the work that was done there.

LEVINE: Oh. Did you ever go there? Did you ever see what he did or did—do—

KRANTZ: No, because, you see, I wasn't even born until—

LEVINE: Oh, that's right.

KRANTZ: —soon—

LEVINE: Right, uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. But did he talk about it with you? Do you have any—apparently, that's a very old and—

KRANTZ: They're—they're—of course, they're both deceased, my mother and father.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: But their memories of Russia they kept hidden in their hearts because they were very angry at how it turned—everything, the political par— atmosphere turned out. As a matter of fact, they—when we came to this country they wouldn't allow us to speak Russian in the house. They wanted us to forget Russian and to be American citizens and learn their language, the—the new language better.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Did you speak Yiddish or Jewish at home?

KRANTZ: Not too much. A little. Our—our home language was Russian.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: My father was a—read and recited all the wonderful Russian poetry and read all the famous Russian literature. And he was very—a very strong nationalistic person.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: But he was really—

LEVINE: Disillusioned.

KRANTZ: —disillusioned.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: But both my mother and father went to night school when they came to this country and learned—

LEVINE: Wonderful.

KRANTZ: —the language.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, how about the years after your father left? Can you—can you talk about what it was like for—

KRANTZ: Well—

LEVINE: —your sisters and your mother?

KRANTZ: It was very difficult. It was very difficult because, you know, when you get—at those years, when you receive money from overseas, even when we got money from my father, it was late or it didn't come and it was—it was just difficult. Life was very difficult. I remember that. But, of course, I was an infant for some time. And when my grandparents were with us, you know, they took care of us. I don't remember too much about it. My—

LEVINE: But—

KRANTZ: —mother had access to a cow. She made her own cheese. She made her own butter, you know.

LEVINE: Apparently, that was quite a—quite an accomplishment to have, to have a cow.

KRANTZ: [unclear]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. D—so grandparents on both sides, as far as you know, they were born in that area?

KRANTZ: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

KRANTZ: They were born there and those that we left from the other side of the family—that is, my mother's side of the family who were her—her siblings were quite a bit older than she. She was the youngest of about seven children. And we tried to trace the—through Red Cross after the war but they couldn't find them.

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm.

KRANTZ: But we had a—we had a difficult time getting out of Russia.

LEVINE: Well, tell me first. Your father was here and then the war broke out and you heard from him sporadically, if at all.

KRANTZ: [unclear] broke out.

LEVINE: And th—and then you—there was no contact for a while.

KRANTZ: No contact. He—there was one person who was a distant relative who had some—I can't remember exactly what but he had some kind of a job, government. And he went to Russia a couple times and saw us and came back. This was early on when my father couldn't send money.

And he gave him money to give us, which, of course, we never got.
[chuckles]

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh.

KRANTZ: All came out—

LEVINE: Afterwards.

KRANTZ: —afterwards.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So what was your father doing then in this country when the war was going on?

KRANTZ: My father went directly to Iowa because his sister lived in Iowa City where the university is. And she was married here in this country, although she married somebody who came from the area where we lived in Russia. And so he went into business with his brother-in-law and it was a business like a lot of immigrants started. It was a collecting-junk business and then went into coal business. And then it went into oil business and then into owning some oil station—gas stations.

LEVINE: Oh.

KRANTZ: And finally, into artificial gas for fuel. That's the way it went.

LEVINE: Well, what was he doing when you—when the rest of the family arrived? Where was he [chuckles] in the progression of businesses? Do you remember?

KRANTZ: He was in the junk and coal business.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: They hadn't left the junk business yet. They—they picked up junk from the h—from the countryside, from the farms and so on that was not useable, you know. And they brought it, weighed it, and then they'd collect it and sold it to steel mills.

LEVINE: Wow, hmm. Now, was your father's sister the first one of the family to come to this country?

KRANTZ: Yes. No. No, I think she was the second. She had a sister. No, she was the first. You're right. It was his sister who was in Chicago.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And—and so she prompted him to come? I mean, she—she wrote or—

KRANTZ: No, she didn't know him. She didn't know him. She didn't know him in there. She met him. He just hap—no, wait. Maybe she did know him. I don't really remember that.

LEVINE: But I mean your father, his sister—

KRANTZ: Well, my father—

LEVINE: His sister wrote to him or encouraged him?

KRANTZ: Actually, he wrote her and told her he was coming. That's the way it happened.

LEVINE: I see. And—and his reason for leaving when he did? Do—

KRANTZ: His reason for leaving when he did was that he wanted to go to Palestine. That was his aim. And actually, he sold himself out of his brother-in-law's business when he got word from the—from ORT that we were coming and went to New York to wait for us. Unfortunately, he waited and waited and waited and we didn't arrive. So he went back to Iowa. Then when we came into New York he wasn't there.

LEVINE: Wasn't there. Hmm. Well, when he—you say he sold—he sold out his part of the business? Is that what you said?

KRANTZ: He sold out to his brother—

LEVINE: Brother-in-law.

KRANTZ: You know, sold out is not like it is today. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles] I suppose.

KRANTZ: [unclear] dollars here and there. [chuckles]

LEVINE: You mean he sold it to—in order to—

KRANTZ: Got out of his business.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was his thinking then? Why was he going to get out of it at that—

KRANTZ: He was going to meet us in New York—

LEVINE: Yeah.

KRANTZ: —and go directly to Palestine, which, of course, my mother didn't know and didn't want to do.

LEVINE: Ah.

KRANTZ: But—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: Fortunately for her, that was 1921, the year of a terrible Arab revolt in Palestine and nobody could enter Palestine. So we had to go back to where he was.

LEVINE: I see.

KRANTZ: He met us in Chicago then.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, now, how—[clears throat] when you and your res—the rest of your family left in 1921, how—how did that get arranged or how did it get decided that you would leave when you did?

KRANTZ: Well, we—we hired somebody to help us at—at some points because I remember—I don't remember everything. I have a feeling and a recollection. Now, I think I remember some things because it's in my mind, and I remember some things that I heard from repetition.

LEVINE: Okay.

KRANTZ: But I do remember crossing one border when we were hidden in a hay—it was a—a—a wagon with horses. And we were hidden in the hay in the wagon. And my mother bribed the—the Bolshevik—the Bulshiks [PH], we called—they called them in those days—at the borders with things that she owned.

LEVINE: Jewelry or—

KRANTZ: She had a couple things, small things. She had a very pretty pin. She—I remember her telling it—and a ring. But she had material and pillows and things that, you know, you could bribe with. And we were almost caught several times but we managed to—

LEVINE: Do you remember actually leaving your home?

KRANTZ: No, I don't remember that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: I wish I did but I don't.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And so do—do you remember any scary parts of—of that journey to the port?

KRANTZ: I remember when my—I remember thinking—now, I think I remember that—that my mother was so concerned whether there would be an affidavit anywhere in the—from the Eastern European countries where we might find an affidavit from my father, whom, of course, I didn't even know, that he would be our char—we would be his charge when we arrived in this country, which we needed to get in here.

LEVINE: Did you—did he send tickets? Did you have tickets, do you know?

KRANTZ: No, when we—when we came into ORT and they found out—we told them who we were and we told them who my father was, they wired him and he wired money for our passage.

LEVINE: Ah.

KRANTZ: That's the way it was done. Fortunately, when we got to Poland where we landed first, we direct—went directly to ORT, because we had heard from other people who had family that went over, you know, that you go to ORT and they help you. We went there and told them who we were and they—there was an affidavit there for us. So they wired my father and got the money for us to come to the United States.

LEVINE: Now, where was this ORT office located?

KRANTZ: In Warsaw.

LEVINE: In Warsaw. Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: There was lots of places. I'm sure there was probably one in Prague and other places.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember anything at all—anything about ORT? How—how you were treated, what happened?

KRANTZ: Well, I remember—I remember my mother's relief. I remember my mother's relief. That's just about all I remember.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: It's too bad.

LEVINE: And so you were in Warsaw. And then where did you leave from?

KRANTZ: We went—left from Antwerp. We went to Antwerp. I don't remember how but I know that my mother always said we left from "Antwarpen."

LEVINE: [chuckles]

KRANTZ: Which is Antwerp.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And do you remember anything about Antwerp? Anything about—

KRANTZ: I don't remember anything about Antwerp but I remember a few things about the ship.

LEVINE: Good. [chuckles] Okay.

KRANTZ: I remember a few things about the ship. I don't know. It was a fairly good—my mother always said it was a fairly good ship, which did not happen to everybody. It was just a matter of luck. But now, on the ship were my mother, my grandmother, my two sisters and I. There were five of us. Everybody was seasick. I was not seasick. So the rule was that you didn't get anything to eat unless you went to the dining room.

LEVINE: Were you traveling steerage or third class? Do you know?

KRANTZ: I think we were—it seems to me we might have been—third class was the next to the steerage.

LEVINE: It was—it would have been probably cabins—

KRANTZ: Yes.

LEVINE: But—

KRANTZ: We had a cabin.

LEVINE: Rather than a dormitory.

KRANTZ: Yeah, we had a cabin.

LEVINE: Okay.

KRANTZ: All five of us were in one cabin.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: And I remember, you know, there were layered beds. And so I was the one who was elected to go up on the—to the dining room.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: And I remember my—my eldest sister w—was—just had a desire for herring. She was—wanted something salty. And I had to sneak things off of the dining room table. [chuckles] And my mother wanted—gave me a—a [unclear], you know, to go up on board to try and get an orange. And she gave me—she gave me several pieces of—of, you know—

LEVINE: Change or—

KRANTZ: Yeah, change.

LEVINE: —whatever. Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: And the dime was smaller, you know. So I paid a dime and I should have paid a nickel. [laughter] I remember that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And were you able to get an orange?

KRANTZ: Yes, I got an orange and paid a dime for it. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And had you—you had had oranges—

KRANTZ: Yes.

LEVINE: —before?

KRANTZ: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Yeah. And do you remember anything else about that voyage? About other people aboard ship or incidents?

KRANTZ: [unclear] a lady that was very nice to us. If I ever hear of somebody, I'm just thinking that maybe there might be a connection from somebody who was on the same ship. That's why I'm anxious to give you the name of the ship.

LEVINE: The name of the ship. That would be nice.

KRANTZ: [unclear] send to you.

LEVINE: And you do know—do you know—you—did you say it left in September?

KRANTZ: We arrived in—

LEVINE: You arrived in September. You may have left in August?

KRANTZ: Probably. Probably.

LEVINE: Well—

KRANTZ: Oh, maybe—

LEVINE: If we have the port and the ship and the dates—

KRANTZ: I know—

LEVINE: —we would perhaps be able to connect it up.

KRANTZ: Oh.

LEVINE: Although the number of people we interview compared with the number of people who came is a [chuckles] pretty great difference. But anyway. Okay, so when the ship came into the New York harbor, do you remember that?

KRANTZ: I remember we came into the New York harbor and we expected my father to be there. But you see, at Ellis Island—we went directly to Ellis Island—nobody was allowed to come in from the outside to Ellis Island because I don't remember whether this person met us—that is, from the shore. We were on the ship, I think. I think we were on the ship when she was at the shore and waved to us and called to us. And she was a sister to this brother-in-law that my father was in business with.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: And she was the only one who lived in New York who she came to greet us because she knew that my father wasn't going to be there because he was there and left. So she greeted us but then we never saw—we never could talk to her up close because she couldn't—

LEVINE: Oh.

KRANTZ: —get to us. And we went directly to Ellis Island. And because my grandmother had something wrong with a finger and I had this speck in my eye, we were detained for a little while. We were on—in Ellis Island for about two weeks is all. Finally got through.

LEVINE: Do you remember being processed? The whole process? Do you remember exams or—

KRANTZ: I don't remember the processing but I remember lining up for graham crackers and milk.

LEVINE: Before you went to sleep? Was that when that was?

KRANTZ: [unclear] in the afternoon—

LEVINE: In the afternoon.

KRANTZ: —or evening. Late afternoon, I guess.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, did you—did you sleep together with the rest of your family?

KRANTZ: We slept in one cabin, all of us. I—I think there were cabins—cots on—one higher and one lower.

LEVINE: Like bunks, yeah. And—and—

KRANTZ: Bunks.

LEVINE: But your whole family had one little room to yourself.

KRANTZ: The whole—yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, now, you said your grandmother, your mother, your two sisters, you—and a brother?

KRANTZ: No, the brother was born in the United States.

LEVINE: Oh, right. Okay. So it was all—all females in the family were traveling? Uh-huh. And let's see. So two weeks. So do you remember anything that was said about your grandmother's finger or your eye?

KRANTZ: I remember the horror. I remember my mother's—imagine a—my mother was very young. She was married when she was 17 years old. So she was very young. And imagine being there with three little girls and a mother-in-law and thinking that maybe they wouldn't allow the

mother-in-law and the little girl to come with them. What was she going to do? And the father is in this country and we're—it was—I remember that horror. I don't remember what the sequence—I don't remember the sequence but I remember the horror that my mother had.

LEVINE: Hmm. So what eventually happened as far as—did they tell you—did they—did they hold you for observation for those two weeks or were you waiting—

KRANTZ: Well, they took us—I think, from what I remember hearing, they took us to the room where they—where you have a hearing because they weren't going to let you through.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: And I guess that you could see that—my mother explained how I got this—wasn't from an ill—it wasn't a sickness of the eye that caused the trouble. It was the sickness that I had that caused the trouble in my eye.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So the hearing was pertinent to your eye problem?

KRANTZ: And to my grandmother's problem. Both.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: And they let us through.

LEVINE: What was the story with your grandmother's finger? Do you know?

KRANTZ: I don't remember that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: I don't remember that.

LEVINE: And what about the fact that no one was there to meet you? Was that part of the whole problem of the hearing or the issue of the hearing?

KRANTZ: Well, actually, [clears throat] we went—we were—we were sent—I think this woman arranged it and we were—because she had family in Chicago. We were sent to Chicago right from Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Oh.

KRANTZ: We were sent to Chicago because she arranged something about it. And my father met us—my father just couldn't afford—he didn't have

money for a ticket to go back to New York. So he went to Chicago and he stayed with this family of my—his brother-in-law's family. And they met us at the train in Chicago. And that I remember very well.

LEVINE: Well, just to point—did the—did the sister of your father's brother-in-law—did she come to Ellis Island for that hearing?

KRANTZ: No, she [unclear].

LEVINE: She couldn't. So—

KRANTZ: I don't think anybody could come to Ellis Island to pro—to get inside of Ellis Island without—I mean, they'd have—

LEVINE: Well, sponsors often came and—and that. So what I'm wondering is—

KRANTZ: No, I don't think she was on Ellis Island ever. I think she contacted her brother, my father's brother-in-law, in Iowa City and told them what was happening and told them we would be going to Chicago. Then she told the—you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: I think that's who arranged it. But I don't think she was a—I don't know.

LEVINE: See, usually, women and children were—were—were called for.

KRANTZ: Yes.

LEVINE: They were not simply released.

KRANTZ: Yes.

LEVINE: So there must have been some communication.

KRANTZ: She must have—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: —[unclear] that she would guarantee it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-huh. So now, the meeting in Chi—in Chicago. What do you remember about that?

KRANTZ: Well, we met in Chicago and this relative of—my father's brother-in-law was—his whole family was there and my father. And of course, I was a

very outgoing child. My two sisters were very shy. And so I remember getting into one of those big taxicabs that had the jump seats, you know.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

KRANTZ: And there was room for four people but no room for the fifth so—well, seven people, I think. And there were quite a few people in it because they were there with us. And I went to my father because I knew him from pictures my mother had showed me. And I had sat on his lap so that was nice.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: And then, of course, we got the usual gifts. Our relatives—his relatives bought us baby dolls and buggies.

LEVINE: Wow.

KRANTZ: And my father had new dresses for all the three of us. And I remember some of the dresses.

LEVINE: Really? Could you describe them?

KRANTZ: Well, I don't—I remember I had a dress that was—had a big—they were all wool because, see, it was September getting into winter. And it had a big round skirt. My sister, Sara, had a skirt that was like accordion pleated—a dress. The skirt was accordion pleated and she'd twirl in it. My other sister had a sailor-collared dress, the wool serge with white trim. And here we went along pushing our baby buggies. [laughter] Doll buggies.

LEVINE: Was th—was that part of it? That—that they would—that you would have American clothes?

KRANTZ: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: We had very little. We had very little by the time we got there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: Yeah, but bartered away practically everything we owned.

LEVINE: And—

KRANTZ: But you know what?

LEVINE: What?

KRANTZ: I'm still sleeping on a pillow that was made from down my mother brought from Russia.

LEVINE: Wow, that's nice. Oh. Now, do you—[clears throat]—it sounds as though you were very much welcomed.

KRANTZ: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: You felt very much welcomed.

KRANTZ: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And how did you feel about being around your father for the first time?

KRANTZ: Well, I wasn't shy but, you know, he was so thankful to get us there [chuckles] finally.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: And, you know, Chicago's not our home. We didn't stay there very long.

LEVINE: Right, uh-huh.

KRANTZ: We got the real welcome when we got to his home, which was in Iowa City.

LEVINE: Well, how long did you stay in Chicago?

KRANTZ: Just a couple days.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then how did you get from Chicago to Iowa—

KRANTZ: Took the train. Took the train to Iowa City. And when we arrived in Iowa City the Jewish community—Jewish—and the Jewish community in Iowa City is—was very small. I think there were 20 Jewish families and I think every one of them was lined up at the railroad station. I remember the long, light-colored skirts and blouses that the women wore, you know.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KRANTZ: And it—a matter of fact, I have a friend now who lives in Waterloo who was at the—at that station when we arrived. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness! That's wonderful. Now, in Russia was your family very religious?

KRANTZ: No.

LEVINE: No.

KRANTZ: No, we were not.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: My father was—mother, both, were strong Zionists. And they are very strong believers in tradition. We kept a lot of the traditions. But the tradition meant that for Passover you had the whole family and you enjoyed it, holidays and lighting the candles on holidays, Friday nights sometimes.

LEVINE: These were traditions that you practiced in Russia and continued here?

KRANTZ: Well, they were Jewish traditions, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

KRANTZ: But we've always been interested in Judaism, Zionism, my family. My parents traveled to Israel. We've been to Israel. We have supported all the Israeli things.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Yeah. So when you lived in Russia, was—was it a large Jewish community around you?

KRANTZ: Not too—

LEVINE: No.

KRANTZ: But when we lived in Russia was really the beginning of Zionism. When my father was—became a member, my father and his father went so often to speeches by the very most famous Zionist leaders.

LEVINE: Oh.

KRANTZ: And Hertzl, Theodore Hertzl, who was the founder of Zionism, spoke there. It was a—the area—the—all of White Russia, the area is quite a cultured area as—not—not just for Jewish people. For all people.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: And people believed in education and so on and so forth. My parents were like that.

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to pause here, turn over the tape and then we'll continue.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: Okay. We're continuing with Mrs. Belle Krantz on the side B. And we were talking about the beginnings of the Zionist movement.

KRANTZ: Yes. My father, I told you, was a very strong Zionist, which, of course, makes him a socialist also, and my mother. And he and his father traveled all over the area nearby where these famous people who started the movement for Zionism, which is—Zionism is the movement that worked towards establishing Palestine for a home for the Jewish people, which is now Israel. And it was very interesting to hear him. He really made a name for himself in Zionism because when we were in this country, and they had a Zionist organization in this little town, Iowa City, where we lived. And when people came to visit—when people came to visit in this country to fund for young Israel, which was called Palestine at that time, they knew my father. So we had all of these very famous people. We had Golda Meir at our house when she traveled. She stayed at our house for two weeks and traveled a little ways out to Cedar Rapids and small—other small towns to raise funds for Palestine. And the first president of the—of the—Israel, who was traveling for funds before he became president, was at our home. Any number of them, when they came through the area in Iowa that was around Iowa City came to our home, because my father was just so—so much into it. As a matter of fact, when he and my mother made a trip to Israel he was one of the people who actually got down on the ground and kissed it—

LEVINE: Hmm.

KRANTZ: —with tears in his eyes. So that was very, very nice.

LEVINE: Did you ever hear your father speak—

KRANTZ: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: —to a—to a gathering regarding Zi—

KRANTZ: Small—small gatherings. Oh, yes. He did. Iowa City had just a small group of Jewish people. But they were all learned people. My father was not a religious man but he knew the Bible and Jewish history from the very beginnings, just off the tip of his tongue.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KRANTZ: So—and even though he wasn't a religious man, he served as the cantor in our synagogue, which was a small building.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KRANTZ: But anyway, it was—gave him a very nice outlet for his efforts.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. How about Golda Meir? Do—do you recall anything about her?

KRANTZ: Oh, I remember her so well. I was—I went to Hebrew school. We had one Hebrew teacher, who happened to be our Hebrew teacher because he came to the university to go to the university. But he was learned in Hebrew and biblical history and Jewish history entirely. So I enjoyed going to Hebrew school. And as a matter of fact, I went to Hebrew school until I was a junior in college. I was the only one in the class by then but I studied the language and I studied the Talmud. And my father knew all that so it was nice for me when—when these people came from Palestine and stayed at our homes. I was able to speak Hebrew to them and I remember how impressed Golda Meir was because I spoke Hebrew with her. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles] And wh—how did she strike you as—as—as a personality?

KRANTZ: Oh, she's such a laid back, lovely, lovely woman. But, you know, there was no guile, no—it was just so—she was such a real person.

LEVINE: Hmm, wow. H—this is probably a naïve question but there seems to be a distinction between the religious aspect of—of being Jewish and the cultural, I guess, aspect. How do you—

KRANTZ: Well—

LEVINE: —do you think about that?

KRANTZ: We were religious to a point but we weren't—I—I mean, my father was a—my father knew the Bible by heart. He was a cantor and when he—in his later years, he was blind and he was still a cantor. He knew it all by heart for the high holidays and for every Saturday, anything. And he had

a marvelous voice, untrained, marvelous voice. But he did not—I mean, he didn't [unclear]. He didn't wear the—you know, I've forgotten what the English name is for those—every morning. He didn't pray publicly. But he knew everything and we—he believed that if we lived in the Jewish tradition in our homes that we would be Jews, and if we studied the history then we would be Jews. And that's the way he was.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: Believed in God and believed in doing good deeds.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: That was his religion.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. How do you think he influenced you? Your father?

KRANTZ: Pardon?

LEVINE: How do you think your father influenced you? What—what would you say—

KRANTZ: I feel exactly the same way as my father does. He used to come to visit us in Waterloo when we were married and he had—I'd go to services with him because something to do, you know. And I still, to this day, sit in the same place. I just could feel him next to me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-huh.

KRANTZ: He influenced me by want—I knew he wanted me to know Hebrew. When I left home we couldn't—we—we sent letters back and forth in Hebrew. He wrote to me in Hebrew. He had a big library of Hebrew literature magazines, which he donated to the University of Iowa.

LEVINE: Oh.

KRANTZ: Uh-huh. So he was a cultured, intellectual Jew.

LEVINE: Well, it—it sounds as—

KRANTZ: Which does not mean that if you're religious you aren't. I don't want to leave that impression.

LEVINE: Oh, no, no. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. But it sounds like you—you actually left, in many ways, a more cultured place than what you arrived at in this country. Is—is that a fair statement? Or—or wouldn't you—

KRANTZ: Well—

LEVINE: Don't you think about it that way?

KRANTZ: No, because we were in a university town. And we had a lot of visitors from—my father was very close to the School of Religion, the seat of Judaism at the university. And we knew the professor and he came to our home and he could discuss things with him. And the Hebrew schoolteacher was so knowledgeable. He was a very good friend of ours.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: So—and a lot of the people were like my father, you know. Some were a little better; some were a little worse. [chuckles] You know.

LEVINE: But your father must have been quite educated when he—

KRANTZ: Self educated.

LEVINE: Self.

KRANTZ: Because his father was very educated.

LEVINE: I see. I see.

KRANTZ: Sounds like I'm talking all about fathers. But you know, in those days the mothers kept house and that was it. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Hmm. How did your mother like the transition to being—

KRANTZ: Oh, she liked it here.

LEVINE: —in this country?

KRANTZ: It was difficult. It was very difficult because we didn't have much money.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: But she was a very capable woman. She sewed every single thing we wore. And we were always the talk of—of friends with our clothing. So she was happy. She was a very good cook, a very good housekeeper. She was a beautiful woman and very young, you know, and was not too long before she joined a bridge club [chuckles] with some women who

weren't Jewish and some friends from the Jewish community. And they did a lot of cultural things. They had a literary group that met regularly and read books together and recited poetry together. And the first thing—first piece of furniture my parents bought when we got to Iowa City was a piano.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KRANTZ: So we could all take piano lessons. So they—they got it all.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

KRANTZ: People who wanted it could get it, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And was—was the attitude of your parents to become—that—that you children should become American? Was that—

KRANTZ: Oh, yes. They wanted us to become American. American Jews.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: And that's one of the reasons they wanted us to speak English in our home. And none of the children came away with a—with an accent of any kind. You know, my oldest sister also didn't.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, did your father still entertain the idea of going to Palestine or, then, Israel?

KRANTZ: Well, he thought about it but, you know, he always had that idea. But my mother was not ready to struggle in a young Palestine again. And he knew she didn't want to go. So that was—by then, he had to have—he had to earn enough money to support us. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. W—what do you think were the effects of immigration on your family?

KRANTZ: I don't think the children felt it at all because we became integrated with our cousins and our neighborhood very quickly. I think my mother always had a little bit of a depressive attitude because of the hardships she went through. And they were many. Those seven years that we were alone were just—we didn't feel it as much but she had a lot of responsibility.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: So it was difficult.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KRANTZ: But she was—she adjusted to it, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So then what—what happened? You went—do you remember your first days in school in Iowa City?

KRANTZ: Oh, yes. We went—we had a school that was just a couple blocks from where we lived, a—grade school, elementary school. And of course, when we came into the school one of the teachers was the one who taught night school, so she had had my father in a class, which my mother joined when she arrived. But they put us all in the first grade because we couldn't speak the language. And then as each of us—as we learned the language, they adjusted the grade to our ages. And before long, we were in the grade where we building, you know.

LEVINE: Were there other—many other immigrant children, do you recall, in school?

KRANTZ: In our school I don't think there were.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: There were a few in the—in the community, the Jewish community. I don't know about the non-Jewish community. Maybe there were some there too. But, you know, Iowa City was a small town. Not that many people went to Iowa City. They got there maybe eventually but they didn't go there because of a relative very often, you know.

LEVINE: Right, right.

KRANTZ: It was a small town.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how was learning the language for you?

KRANTZ: Well, we didn't have too much trouble because we had our cousins. My father had moved a house from long—far distance [chuckles] to the area where my—my father's sister and her husband and family lived. And they had six children eventually. Well, no, I think all six of them were born by then. Right. So there were six children to be with plus our school. So we picked up the language quickly.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: I remember getting F's on our first report cards in language. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. [chuckles] Uh-huh. And were the teachers very helpful to you?

KRANTZ: Very helpful. Very nice.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: Very nice. You know, small town classes aren't quite so large and there's more personal attention.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. And so how long did you continue then in school?

KRANTZ: Well, you mean in that school or—

LEVINE: Well, no. All your s—

KRANTZ: We all—we all went to college. We all graduated from university. My father—my brother, who was born about a year after we were in this country, was—became a physician. He was an internist in Phoenix. And my sister was a dietitian and my other sister was—just was in liberal arts. And I became a physical education teacher. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. So, well, that incredible for the first generation to—everybody to go to college. That's really—so how did you meet your husband?

KRANTZ: Well, my husband came to school at Iowa. He had a friend who went to school, to dental school and liked it very much and a boy—a friend who lived at—near him. And he was from New Jersey. So he came to school at Iowa, also because in New Jersey there was no uni—medical or dental school at that time because—

LEVINE: Oh.

KRANTZ: —there was a law against cutting into cadavers, whatever. You know—

LEVINE: Oh.

KRANTZ: Can't remember the word. Anyway, so that law has been repealed. But at that time he couldn't go to school in New Jersey. And going to school in New York was very expensive. And also, Iowa had a good reputation for dental school. So when his friend asked him to come he did. And then I met him on the campus.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And why don't you give your husband's name for the—

KRANTZ: My husband's name is Seymour Krantz and he—he is now 86 years old. But he retired from dentistry when he was 80.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

KRANTZ: He enjoyed his work very, very much and continued it for that long because of that.

LEVINE: Wow. And did you have children?

KRANTZ: We have two daughters. One lives—they both live in Minneapolis. And one is married to a physician. The other one was married—was married to a lawyer. And they each have two children and one of those is our grandson who's getting married this weekend in New York.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. [chuckles] Great. How—how do you think those early years in Russia and—and the fact that your other family members were there long—how do you think they have influenced you as your person—your personality, your attitudes? Do you think that has made a difference?

KRANTZ: Well, we went back to visit Russia—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: —oh, about six years ago, I think it was. I can't remember exactly when. But it was just at the point when the government was changing. When we were there it was still very restricted. But there were people that got up to talk in some of the parks. That was not allowed.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: But they took those chances. Very soon after that the government was beginning to change.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: I don't know. I can't say—I can't say whether it was Russia that influenced us. It was our parents who influenced us. And whatever they—wherever they got it, I suppose was from their lineage—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: —and from the surrounding area that—very strong, very strong influence for education. Education. Education. We were forced to read, not forced but so encouraged to read, to have knowledge of the arts and so on. You know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Hmm. And how about this time in your life? How—how is this time in your life for you now that you're—

KRANTZ: Well, I—

LEVINE: —retired?

KRANTZ: I'm very busy and very happy. I'm still playing tennis three times a week indoors.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: I'm playing a little outdoors but mostly playing golf. I belong to a very nice study group that hires a—a director from one of the teachers, professors from the university at—it's a college—University of Northern Iowa in Waterloo, Cedar Falls. And I play a lot of bridge, duplicate bridge. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: And I—I'm very happy. I'm very energetic. I'm—we're bo—both very lucky. My husband and I, we're both in good health—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: —and have a lot of energy, can do a lot of the things that we want to do.

LEVINE: Hmm. W—what would you say you're proudest of or—or feel that you—

KRANTZ: I'm the most proud of our daughters. They are wonderful, wonderful girls. Our older—our older daughter is—has her own business now. She is a director of—of—well, what she does is she counsels. She has a—a degree from the university in speech pathology and audiology. And she has a—a master's in social work. So she is—she did some work with a company in this and finally went out in her own business. She helps businesses to a—arrange their personnel and their financial affairs. Like when a father dies in a family, who should take over the business? And who should do this and who should do that? Or when a company wants help with their arrangement of their personnel. And she's been very successful at that.

LEVINE: And what's her name?

KRANTZ: Susan.

LEVINE: Susan.

KRANTZ: Our younger daughter is a vice president in charge of human resources in—with American Express. And she has a very good position and she works with helping to research the companies that American Express funds—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: —and other things. And she likes her work very much and she's appreciated and she's very good at it.

LEVINE: Hmm. And how about being here today at Ellis Island? How does that feel to you?

KRANTZ: Well, there are things about it that strike some kind of a note of memory in my mind, like the benches. Somehow, the benches just hit me. But I don't remember too much about it. I just don't remember too much about it. I remember—as I say, I remember lining up to get that milk and graham crackers. [chuckles] And I remember kind of have a fear—feeling of my mother scurrying around and I remember we worried about my grandmother. But I don't remember the things in between, you know, that tie it all together.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. How about first impressions? I neglected to ask you that. When you first came to the United States, do you remember any things that struck you?

KRANTZ: I remember seeing the Statue of Liberty. I remember seeing that. I don't remember the skyline. I'm so surprised I don't remember that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KRANTZ: But I guess it was so foreign to me that—and I was just young enough so that I didn't think of it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Yeah. Okay. Well, is there anything else that maybe we haven't touched on that—that you can think of relative to your immigration experience or its effects on you later or—

KRANTZ: Well, I—I've listened to a lot of this because my brother, who died a couple of years ago, has complete records of everything on tape that my father and mother both tell. And that's very interesting because they sing Russian songs, recite some Russian poetry. They talk about Israel. They talk about the synagogue and their life in Russia. And I've enjoyed

that so whenever we go to Phoenix his wife runs the tapes so we can hear them too.

LEVINE: Wow. I don't—are they audiotapes? They're audio or video?

KRANTZ: They're audio.

LEVINE: Audio. I was thinking if—if it's possible for us to copy them, we might like to have those in this archive as well.

KRANTZ: I'll ask my sister-in-law.

LEVINE: Okay. [chuckles] Okay, well, I—I want to tell you, it's been a real pleasure. I'm so happy that I had a chance to talk with you and meet you.

KRANTZ: Well, I appreciate it too. I'm glad we were here. I'm just thinking that maybe someday somebody'll contact us [chuckles] from—some way.

LEVINE: Well, that—in other words, you're saying that anyone from Russia—you mean of the—of the Markovitz family?

KRANTZ: No, I mean anybody who's on that ship, maybe.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Well, you'll need to get the name of the ship.

KRANTZ: I'll get the name of the ship.

LEVINE: And—and that—that would be interesting, indeed.

KRANTZ: Okay.

LEVINE: Okay, I've been speaking with Belle Markovitz Krantz, who came from White Russia in 1921 at the age of seven. And this is March 28th, 1998. This is Janet Levine, for the National Park Service, signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]