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GERTRUDE YELLIN
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RUSSIA, 1921
AGE 14
PASSAGE ON "THE FINLAND"

ALLEE: This is Debra Allee. I'm speaking with Gertrude Yellin on Monday, the 10th of February, 1986. This is Interview Number 144. We're beginning this interview at 11:30. We're about to interview Mrs. Yellin about her immigration experience from Russia in the year 1921.

YELLIN: In August.

ALLEE: Okay, Why don't we begin at the beginning, where you were born and when?

YELLIN: Okay. I was born in Bialystock. It's White Russia. When I was a kid the government was changing and I went

to Russian school. But then the War broke out and my education was interrupted. Because at that time many governments were conquering that territory. Poland, Germany, and Russia. They were coming back and forth. And then no education was going on. All the schools were closed. At that time the Hebrew and the Yiddish language came to life. And the children of the school age turned to either the Jewish language, the Yiddish or Hebrew. I was in love with the Hebrew language. And my education started Hebrew. And now I will go back to the period how we came to this country. We suffered a great deal during the War. It was hunger. Before was pogroms and hunger. And no life of any kind. As a child I don't even remember my being a child and having toys and luxuries like the children in this country. As a child I was a serious person. Very serious. My parents were very dear to me. We had, we kids were brought up in an atmosphere with the greatest admiration for my parents. And they were the first to get the joy of life. And then when the, at that time, just before the War, my sister, my father went to America. And that time, that was many years before the War, as a young man my father had a desire to have his own home. So he bought a lot, a big lot and he meant to build

houses. He was a carpenter by trade. And he built the first house and then he built another house. At that time conditions were so bad he couldn't pay the mortgage. And it came to the point that they had to leave the country for America to make money so they can pay the mortgage of the houses. And my mother was left with us kids and we had a grocery at the time. It was a difficult life. My father was in America for six years until he paid off his debt. Then he came home. And then he came home and made enough money to pay off his debt and he built one home for ourselves. And it was fine until, yes, then my mother, when my father was in America, he asked that they should, one of the kids should come to America. So my sister Libby, she said she wants to go and live with Papa. So she left for America and then she got married here and she was quite happy. She also wanted my mother to come and visit her. So my mother left and she stayed in New York City in the Bronx, they lived and they had a restaurant. So my mother stayed there one year. And when she came home she was a different person. She came to the United States as a plain, ordinary, poorly, rather, dressed woman, but she came home as a lady. Not only in her appearance but in her behavior as well. I do remember the

time when she used to wear everyday a white blouse and skirt. Beautiful clothes she brought a whole trunk of clothes. And all our neighbors and all the family came to see the miracle of my mother's coming home. She even wore a corset. Why, in those years who would know? The women, the neighbors never saw it even. Anyhow, and washing the blouses was not an easy deal. Here, in America it was easy because they had hot water and cold water. We didn't have faucets with hot water. We were. we'd still have cold water from the faucet, but not hot. And that meant to bring the wooden, what do you call it--

ALLEE: Tub?

YELLIN: Tub, and heat the water on the stove, which it was heated with wood. In big pots, pour it in the wooden tub and wash the clothes by hand. And then rinse it and dry it outside. It was quite difficult. She did it for a long time until she got tired and she couldn't do it anymore, that I remember. But one thing I do remember very well, I can even see the view where my mother would sit outside and all the neighbors around her. Surrounded her and listened to the miracles of the beautiful American lifestyle. She never stopped talking. My sister took her everywhere. She took her to the theater, to shows, to restaurants. My mother never saw that

in all her life and when she came home I'll never forget the arguments. She said she wants to take the family and go to live in America. And that was the argument in our home, day after day. "I don't want to live in this country. I had enough. We had pogroms. And we had riots, anti-semitic religious riots. They were constantly in fear. They were in fear and depression and degradation. I want to live in a country where it's free." My father, on the other hand, was rather reluctant. "What? Shall I go to America? I'll be plain laborer. Her I am a landlord." A landlord. And my mother was actually sick from having a landlord. We had a few neighbors and what was the result? It was extremely difficult for a landlord in those years. Tenants would move in and they would paint the apartment and then they move out and they didn't pay their rent. And there was no way of getting from them the money for rent. They did what they wanted. And that's why my father had to come here to make enough money to pay off the mortgage. Anyhow, the result was that my father postponed it. "Maybe next year. Maybe next time." And so a few years passed by. In the meantime number one World War broke out. And we were stuck. And then it was hunger and misery. And we weren't safe with our lives. Bombs were coming down from heaven constantly. Every nation that came in, when the Russians left they burned the city completely. All the places of the government places were in fire. I do remember when I walked out in the yard and the sky was red. There was no night. It was dark at night, but I didn't see the darkness. And I rejoiced it, I danced, I said, "My, it's a beautiful red

world." Then my mother ran after me, grabbed me, put her in her arms and she said, "You cannot be outside today because it's dangerous." And that was war. When the Germans came in we thought that we'll have a wonderful life. But soon after we found out that they confiscated every store. Every piece of food. Every store, the materials and everything was confiscated, taken away. And we were miserable. All we had to eat is the skin of the potatoes. That's what they called Flokies. And that's what they gave us. And it was rationed. Extremely, lack of food. They took everything they could take. I wonder if I should tell you about the garden that we planted?

ALLEE: Sure.

YELLIN: At that time they said that, "If you want to have food, plant." Now, in the back of our yard, of the house, there was a big field. It was stones and clay and it was never cleaned up. So my father took the job. I'll always remember how we carried these stones and how we worked so terribly hard and we made a garden of vegetables. And that helped us a great deal. But my father just was so eager to have everything in order that he climbed a tree to cut off the branches and he fell down. he fell down and hurt his back. But in those years people didn't go to doctors unless they were dangerously ill. But he went to bed and he laid down for a week or two and then he went around again. And that was an injury that came back to him later on and probably he died from it. And that's what happened

in the later years. But this I want to say. Now, I also remember that a cousin of mine came from a small town, Trestine, and he said that there they have food. Because the farmers would bring in the, the farmers would bring in some food to these small towns and there was more food than in the city.

And I as a kid, because I don't think I was a kid, I was very serious and understanding and I said that I will go to bring the food. They were, there wasn't any transportation not by horse not by car and not by train. But for two weeks while I was there, a transport of wagons with apples were transferred from out city to the town. And that's the time I decided to go in the wagon with apples.

ALLEE: How old were you then?

YELLIN: I don't know exactly how old, I must have been about ten years or so. So what happened, I went into the wagon. It was already night time. The sun was setting down. The, the place was so beautiful, the country, and I can still feel the wagons going with the horses. A whole transport of horses and wagons. And I being Jewish was very much afraid because it was dangerous. There were all kinds of nations, they didn't, especially the Jewish people. The Polish people were after the Jewish people. And I put on a coat of a peasant, the fur coat. And I remember I had a, a, a, kerchief on my head, and covered my eyes and my face. Just like a peasant woman. So they wouldn't know me. And there I was in the wagon.

Dark, the stars were out and I was there in the wagon. And I came there and then I couldn't go home. And my cousins prepared a bottle of oil, I remember, and one or two loaves of bread and a can of honey, and that was a big deal in those days. And they put it in the wagon, and then transportation was cutoff. That is, the Polish, Polish people were now the Germans were now there and there was no way of getting anymore. Finally about two weeks later another transport was going also, they delivered some kind of food, of apples, I don't remember exactly. And my cousin said, "Don't go, it's dangerous." Because the bridges were all cut off. Oh yeah, I must say this incident what happened while I was in that little town. Uh, as a kid, maybe I was nine, I don't know, I don't remember. At that time, you know, children don't feel the, the danger of war. And children are very courageous. As a matter of fact, I don't think I felt even death because I, I don't think the, that it's so terrible to die. It wasn't worth while living altogether. But I was very determined. Very strong in character. At the time the Germans left that territory and the Polish people were about to enter the territory. It was, I, it was a beautiful day and our cousin had his own home and he had a big field so I walked out in the field to get up flowers. I have the flowers here. And I saw fire. I saw, uh, I saw shooting I saw soldiers. I wasn't afraid. So I ran to the house. I walk into the house, there was no one there. The whole family went away to hide themselves. And I was left alone. They forgot about me or there wasn't enough time for them to catch me. They didn't know where I was evidently.

Anyhow I came in, it's an empty house. Not a soul. As I come into the house, before I looked around, somebody knocks on the door. I opened the door, I didn't know who it is. Or maybe I, I didn't open, I don't remember, but the knock was so heavy that the door opened. A soldier came in with a gun.

ALLEE: Bayonet.

YELLIN: Bayonet. A big one. And the first thing he could say, "Morda." That means you Jewish face, you know, something like that. And he says, "Give me the money. Give me the clothes. Give me everything you have." I say, "I have nothing." I say, "I can't give you anything. And you're not going to take anything from this house." Just like that. As you see me, I stood near a closet. In Europe they didn't have closets for clothes but they have big closets. Huge closets there where the people keep their clothes. So I, and he was walking towards the closet because we keep all the good things in there. And I stood like this, I say, "You are not going to touch it." He took the bayonet and he put it right next to my heart. And he says, "In a minute, you'll disappear." I say, "I don't care, you can kill me. But you're not going to touch anything from this house." He was amazed at my courage. He cursed me and cursed me and grabbed something, anything he could, and he left. And you see, I still can't understand how the kids of that generation, how I was so brave that I was

willing to give up my life for the, for the things, for treasures of my cousin. And that's, that was an experience. Now I will tell you how I came home. That was also a treacherous experience. When I, when the Germans left and the Polish people already settled in that territory. That was the time it was about a few weeks the, the wagons with the merchandise were going again. And I decided to go home. My cousin begged me, "Please don't go, it's dangerous!" Because the bridges were torn. They were (inaudible) and pebbles all over and fires and, and ammunition, people all over, the military. But I said, "I don't know where my mama or papa is and I must go." So I went back home in a wagon again. And in the wagon I put my treasures. A bottle of oil and can of honey and the bread and maybe some flour or corn or something like that. As they left, now, in the beginning of the, of the wagon, it must have been ten wagons. was a young fellow by the name of Yonkle and he was second one from the leader to lead the, anyway I don't remember the second or the first, he was leading the caravan. And at the end was his brother. And these two people are Jewish the rest were all Polish. And go, at night it's clear and beautiful and stars are shining and my heart is jumping and I'm making up stories, "Suppose the robbers come along? What am I going to say, what am I going to do. What am I going to ask them. The first thing I will ask them to take me to the commandant, the leader. And then I will fall on my knees and I'll beg and I'll tell them that I'm innocent and I will ask him to save my life." This was all the things I had in my mind. To be alive and how to work, how to behave. Then

all of a sudden a soldier came out of the darkness on a horse. "Stop." And the whole wagon stopped. And the first thing he did, he started to search the wagons. "What have you got? Do you have an whiskey? Do you have?" Whatever, whiskey, anything, they will take. Mostly whiskey they were looking for. Our, I remember that I was stretched out in the wagon and my feet were so stiff just like the poles in the wagon, the wooden, what do you call that? The wooden things that, the long poles, round poles of wood.

ALLEE: Axles.

YELLIN: Axles. Just one of the axles. And when he left, it was dark, and he went to search in the wagon and he felt my feet. They were just as stiff as the wooden axles and they, and they didn't see me and I was covered with the, with the coats of the peasants, you know. Everything covered underneath and my feet were so stiff and I didn't say boo and I didn't scream. Nothing. But I do remember he felt my feet. And my feet were just right near the axles. He felt and then he saw, he found the bottle of oil. And he pulled out the bottle of oil and he started to say, "You rotten Jew." He said, "You have no whiskey. Here, you've got a bottle of whiskey." He, so the fellow said, "It's not whiskey it's oil. We come, come from the country and we got a bottle of oil." It is not!" He put his finger, he tasted, he saw it was oil so he let us go. Then he found the honey and they put a finger in the honey. And everything he found they let

it go. Money, money, money. He wants the money. He couldn't find whiskey, he wants the money. So they made a collection. All the drivers. Whatever money they had they put together and they gave to him. But he went away. He went away and a little while later two soldiers came on, on horses, riding and they stopped us again. "Stop!" And again they started to search. It was terrible. And finally they got a hold of that fellow, the Jewish man, and they pulled him out. They were going to shoot him. Money, money. And I can still hear the voice when he called his brother at the end. Yonkle was his name. It was so pitiful. It was so, he was going to kill him and he called Yonkle his brother to help him. So again they digged out some more money they gave them everything they had, all of them. And they let us go. And then we came, it started to burn. I remember the fires in the fields on the road. The fires and soldiers all around. Soldiers, you know? They were just around the fires there, I guess. They were sleeping or resting. And then we came to the bridges and there was water, all water. So the wagons had to go, puddles of water, so high. And again I was afraid they were going to find me. They would take me away, you know. A kid would, they could have, they did anything to get women there. They didn't care who you were, a kid or a grownup. Finally we got to the, we got out of the fields. And I came home. It was about five o'clock in the morning. My parents didn't know where I was. They thought I was killed. And I thought that my parents were killed. As a result, it was, it was outstanding. What a joy it was to see Mama and Papa alive. Now I d\have

also, I don't know whether I'm going to tell you also, but one of my sisters was in Russia and that was another episode. That was a terrible thing but I don't think I should go and tell you all of that.

ALLEE: Let's go on your stories.

YELLIN: Yes. I love my story. Okay.

ALLEE; Let's get you on the road to the U.S.A.

YELLIN: Yes. Now, how I came to this country. Now my mother didn't succeed in persuading my father.

ALLEE; Can we stop a minute and turn the tape over?

YELLIN: Yes, of course.

ALLEE: End of side one.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

ALLEE: Beginning of side two. Okay.

YELLIN: I came home where the war was still going on and everything was rationed. Bread was rationed where we got cards from the, from the German people. They gave out half a pound of bread a day. So that I do remember my father taking in a loaf of bread and cutting a half a pound of bread for each member in the family. And that's all we were allowed to eat. I do remember, I was angry at my father because probably I didn't understand the meaning of, of doing it. I thought maybe he doesn't want to give us another piece of bread but that was the rule in the house. Just that and no more. I also remember during the German staying in, in Bialystock. We had to go in big lines to get our ration of potatoes. We were standing from two, three o'clock in the morning until late in the morning. Maybe nine, ten o'clock in the line. Just to get potatoes, a bag of potatoes. And there were lines of people. Many, many lines of people. And if anyone dared to step out of line then they were, right there the German soldier with his whip. Many people were bleeding from all the knocks. But that's the way it was. I, as a kid, also had to stay in the line to get my ration of potatoes, the portion. That was another terrific experience in my childhood. Now with all this torture and suffering that we went through we were thankful that we remained alive, and then there was no question anymore in the house that we will be going to America as soon as it's possible. By this time my father calmed down, and he agreed that this

is no life and we had to leave. My sister Libby, and also at that time I had one brother and when he reached the age of twenty-one he was supposed to go into the Russian army. But the Russian Army was a very difficult life. It was just a slavery. Nobody wanted to go to serve the Czar. Now, my, since my brother was the only son in the family it was a rule that they wouldn't take him because he was the only son. However, the rule didn't exist for us. He was taken in the army and then what did the people do in those years? They would escape and go to America. And since my sister already was in America, so he was able to steal, uh, he was able to, to steal the territ--where you go from Russia to Germany. There was, uh, what do you call that--

ALLEE: Border?

YELLIN: A border. Yes. A border they were people that, they were paid for that and they would take them across the border. And that's what it, and that's what happened to my brother. He ran away and he went, he came and he lived, stayed with my sister in America. So by that time, during the war we weren't allowed to have any letters from my, from our family in the United States. Because there was no correspondence. So we didn't know anything about them. But as soon as after the war, right after the war,

mail would come and she contacted us through a certain agency, I believe. And she sent us some food from America. And then we decided to leave. So I don't know, I don't think we needed papers but she did send us all the money, the necessary money for the trip. And we started to get ready and the word "America" in those days was the wish, the dream, and the hope of every person. We called that the Golden Land. It was the desire of every human being to reach the gates of the Golden Land. It took us about two years to sell all up, all the property, the things, all kinds of junk that you collect during a lifetime. And in those years you don't throw out anything. I remember that I was sitting as a kid and crocheting and making and fixing table cloths. It was holes but I fixed every one and we sold it and we took good money for that. Because everything was so beautiful.

And we, and we were fooled again. In those years there was, the value, the money, there were marks and rubles and all kinds of money. And my father sold it to a Polish person. And he gave him at that time I think Polish money, and the next few days, the money, the value of the money went down. He was left with nothing. With all our lifetime suffering. Anyhow, we left for the Golden Land.

How I felt when I left for America? It is hard to tell, I was a kid with deep feelings, a rather sensual person. I felt sorry to leave the place where I was born. Where I was brought up, where I spent my childhood, my friends, my room, my little garden. The garden was my life. I was fourteen. I remember we didn't have a lilac tree but my uncle had a lilac tree. So at that time he also sold his home, and I persuaded my father to take that lilac tree and transplant into my little garden which was right near my house. And he did. And every day I would get up early in the morning and watch the lilac tree. It was my place of joy. I also remembered that, like on the Sabbath day I would spend my day in reading philosophy. I didn't understand a word. Spinoza. (Inaudible) But something fascinated me. I also remember that I always wanted to be educated. Education was the dream of my life. But how? In those years education was unreachable, for the Jewish people especially. The higher education was not accessible. It was only accessible for the rich and for non, non-Jews. And later on, even though, because the Jewish people were brought up with one feeling. The parents instilled in their children that the only thing to have in life is education. And I guess that was something

that I felt all my life. I was influenced by that bringing up. But how in the world can, can you get it? Now this is, I must tell you what happened. I had another sister, I was the youngest. And my parents, she was a good student and my parents wanted her to go to gymnasium. Now this was very unreachable, so she decided to hire a teacher. A private teacher and prepare her for the exams. In those years we didn't have the money but my mother would count everyday, take out some money and put away and she hired a teacher. And my sister studied so much. I remember she was so thin from constant studying. Finally the exam came and she made all the exams with honors, in one she had a minus, and of course, she failed. One minus. It's got to be A, A, A, only. And it was a quota for the Jewish people. And who of the Jews would ever enter? Those who gave under the table money. And that's the way it was. The very rich and under the quota. So the day she came and she said that she didn't, she cannot go, she didn't enter, she didn't pass. That day in our home, I remember, was like a Jewish day of atonement, Yom Kippur, everybody cried. It was such crying, such sadness because she failed. And I, of course, was the youngest. I did not reach that stage yet. But my desire to be

educated grew all the time and I knew that some day I would get there. And the thought of going to America found so much joy in my heart. Now, so in one way I sad to leave the place of my birth, even though it was a painful place and then another thing, another feeling was of gladness and joy that I'm going to the free America that my mother told me. And that I'll be able to get the so much desired education. Now we left, it was, it wasn't a very happy occasion to leave everything but we came to Warsaw, I remember that night and then we went to Danzig.

Then from Danzig we went to Antwerp to wait for our boat to arrive.

ALLEE: Did you go on a train?

YELLIN: Yes.

ALLEE: From Warsaw to Danzig?

YELLIN: Yes. We were in Warsaw then we went through Germany. We went through Germany I remember at night, we got to Germany and were riding through the city and there I would see the, the, the war there and the city and the lights and it was very colorful and beautiful. And from Germany I

think we went to Danzig, the port. And from there we went to Antwerp.

ALLEE: And you went, did you go by boat from Danzig to Antwerp or just by train?

YELLIN: By train. By train. The only boat we took was the boat to America. And in Antwerp we were supposed to wait about two weeks for, for the, uh, for the boat to arrive. And the name of the boat, I believe, was Finland.

ALLEE: Finland.

YELLIN: Yes. Are you acquainted?

ALLEE: Spelled like the country?

YELLIN: I think so, yes. In the, and in Antwerp we were, we, we stayed, I don't remember, I think it was in a hotel someplace. A lot of people were there waiting for the boat. I was very much impressed with the city of Antwerp. It's, clean, orderly and it's a life of city and country.

On Sunday the women were dressed beautiful. They would wear house slippers to go to the park to listen to the music. Anyhow that's not important. The happy day arrived and we were going on the boat. Now the three, probably, I

don't remember exactly but at least two weeks that we were on the boat. The food was terrible. And the treatments were very undesirable too. But who cared? In our life was to reach the gates of the Golden Land. And that's all, and we lived with that hope and with that joy.

ALLEE: Do you remember, I gather you were in third class on the boat?

YELLIN: Yes. Yes, of course, otherwise we wouldn't go to Castle Garden?

ALLEE: Was it a big dormitory sort of that you, you slept in?

YELLIN: Very huge dormitory. And I remember there were beds, one on top of the other. And we had a corner, you know, where our family was staying.

ALLEE: And that was you and your parents--

YELLIN: I and my father and mother. And my sister, which, that's a story by itself, she was in Russia yet. She just came from Russia to come with us but since our visas were already due, we could not wait for her. So we went and

she came back six weeks later. She went in six, so we were two girls in the house but she went to Russia because I had another sister and that's another story I'm telling, and a very unhappy situation. So, anyhow, shall I come now my life there, my life on the boat? On the boat I do remember we were sick, very sick and I think they fed us with herring at that time. Is that correct?

ALLEE: It sounds like--

YELLIN: It sounds like true. Yeah, and even that was hard to get, it was, the food was terrible. The treatment was terrible too. And the, we just lived with the hope and the sicknesses. But there wa a lot of immigrants, and it was a lot of fun. And I think I had some young man try to persuade me to be his friend. I didn't understand much but I was afraid anyhow. And he promised me that he would put me on the boat. That was even before we got on the boat. That he would put me on the boat first class. What did he have in mind? I don't know. However--

ALLEE: I'll bet you can guess.

YELLING: Huh? I guess I can guess now but at that time I was very careful, I was brought up in a very religious home and, oh, whoever heard of doing a thing like that? There wasn't even a, the nature of kissing a man in those years, you know? A young man, no. That, that's stories that I can tell you from like, from the little country that I went, that's something else.

ALLEE: When you were on the boat you were about fourteen, fifteen.

YELLIN: I must have been around fourteen, yes. Oh, fourteen, I was a grown up woman by then because I didn't have a regular childhood, I was always a sensible grown up person. The only thing that I had during the pogrom, in Bialystock there was a pogrom. And I was, went to hide myself under the bed with a little kitten. And I was afraid more of the kitten, probably, than of my own life, and I also had a ragged doll from rags. You know, like some old, with the face of porcelain, the old dolls. And I also had a wooden little cradle for the doll. And that's all the toys that I ever had in my life. The Kitten and the ragged doll. So, I do remember that, the pogrom. It was fierceful. Fierceful. Neighbors were killed. As a matter of fact some of the neighbors they hid themselves someplace and, like in a factory, you would go in and there were all kinds of people. So when the, when the pogrom are caught, hooligans would go into the factories

and dig out wherever there were Jewish people. So when they came into the factory and about twelve, I remembered some of our neighbors, twelve of the men hidden away and the Polish people were left in the factory, so when they came in and they asked, "Where are the Jews?" So they told them. And they went and they took them out and they murdered them. Blue murder, right in the street. That was the time of the pogrom. And they also riddled stores talking out all the merchandise from stores. Besides shooting. Anyhow, let's go back to our story. I am now from the boat, I am going on the boat.

It was a very undesirable treatment we had on the boat until we reached the gates of the Golden Land. I remember when I standing on the boat and I saw the lights from the Statue of Liberty and then all around the lighted lights of the city. It was, I, unforgettable, joy, elation that I felt all over me. "Here, I am here, I am here. I'll be able to go to school. I'll be able to be educated." All kinds of things came to my mind. And we landed far away from the, from the city, although. Then a little boat took us over to the place. That I remember, too. And we got into, what do you call it?

Ellis Island. We used to call it Castle Garden. (She laughs.) Castle, you know what castle is, a palace, a garden. It was, okay. And we got, we got in there. It was about eight o'clock in the morning. We got up very early and we walked on the outside, on the deck, I guess. And I remembered the sights. It was beautiful. The night and the stars and everything was so beautiful. And we got into that place, well, there it is. A huge, very huge territory, beds, one on top of the other. Now I do remember that they

gave us. Steamed. We were steamed just like, we had to go through certain periods of steaming. Of steaming and cleaning. And doctors and doctors. We got sick and tired of these, and when we got already to the place, in the morning two doctors came in from the city to examine us. It was torturing, actually, looking in here and just everything. All our clothes were steamed. I guess you know that.

ALLEE: Well, I never heard a story about steaming. But they were disin-, they must have been worried about some disease and they--

YELLIN: Exactly. Exactly, and they were searching for lice in the ear and on your bodies and so on. There were all kinds of people coming there. And that, that was a torture. It was suffering with all this, it was constantly examination and the last examination, ten o'clock in the morning. And then we spent the day there and the night we walked out to watch the lights. To watch, and the ocean, the ocean I guess it's the ocean there. What is the--

ALLEE: The harbor.

YELLIN: Harbor. Was beautiful. And boats were going from place to place surrounding, imagine how I remember all this? Lights, and all the boats were lighted and then lights from the far away city sort of came together with the lights and the boats, and it was beautiful and so peaceful. Such a tranquility I have never felt until I got to that moment.

I was at ease and sort of at ease and relaxed from all the torture and the steaming and the cleaning and the doctors and the examinations. I felt like a Princess again. What a beautiful feeling got over me. And I just, as I stand there and admired and rejoiced, a guard comes along, takes me by the hand, back, time to sleep. They wouldn't let us stay out long. They chased us to our rooms to go to sleep. And that night I had a peaceful sleep, dreams of my future life in the Golden Land. The next day, the next morning we got up very early and again we walked out, was a balcony, a huge balcony around and there to my amazement on the, around the Harbor where we were, little row boats were coming in and those people were the relatives of the immigrants. They came to see the immigrants. But they were not permitted to enter the building and touch the immigrants. This for the, the Americans were the holy people, they were not, I, I don't mean disrespect, I mean, they were afraid of disease of, uh, of not clean enough, you know, anyhow, they were not permitted to come in and meet the people. The only way was, they were permitted if they go on the little row boats and look up and see each other that way. Now, I didn't know my sister because when she left I was a few years old. But I do remember her from the pictures. And I never

met my brother-in-law, because she got married here. So, I was looking and I didn't know where to look. But there was my sister, I called my parents over, and they recognized each other. But it's a funny thing, I didn't feel strange towards her when I saw her. I felt she is part of my life. And she was very, she had, she wore a red hat and that impressed me again. And they waved to us and we sort of threw a kiss to them with our hands and all kinds of motions. We tried to meet one another. They spoke to me or to my parents but it wasn't clear, you couldn't hear the voices and how did that happen, how did I find, how did I went to look for them? Because they called names, they gave the names in the office, I suppose, and they called out, "Yellin." The family Yellin. So when I heard that I ran and then I brought my parents over and that's the way it all, we met. And that was my brother-in-law. And he, and he had a package, a package for us. So how do you get a package? You can't, but there was a rope. And I ran downstairs and I got a hold of the rope, I was very efficient. I was the leader of the, of the family, you see. I was the leader of the family in every way. Whether it acme to buying and waiting and going to the doctor's and to the steam rooms, everywhere, I was the head. And I threw him down the rope and he tied it around the package and we got it up. I got it up and when we opened the package was beautiful fruit. We never saw bananas in our lives and when we saw bananas, you know, it was such a thrill, and other wonderful fruit. And so they came every day and one day my brother came and that's the way we communicated.

ALLEE: Can we hold a minute and change the tape?

YELLIN: Of course.

ALLEE: This is the end of the first tape of the interview with Gertrude Yellin, it is Interview Number 144. It is now, uh, 12:28 on February 10th, 1986.

END OF TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF TAPE TWO

ALLEE: This is the beginning of the second tape of Interview Number 144 with Gertrude Yellin. This is Debra Allee doing the interview. It is 12:30 on Monday, February 10th, 1986. Okay, we're on the Island, still.

YELLIN: Okay. Now our life there. It wasn't a very easy life there. But the thought of seeing our family, being with our family and mostly being in the land of the free where I can go to school and continue my education.

ALLEE: You were there about five days? You said.

YELLIN: I think we were there about five, six days. I'm not sure.

ALLEE: Do you know why you were there so long?

YELLIN: Because they kept us all that time. Maybe it was less. I really don't remember. But I know it was several days. They still examined us, they still had doctors coming in from the city to examine eyes, ears, body. They looked for all kinds of sickness. The hair, everything was examined. And I think this is the reason they kept us so long. Because they were going through, they didn't believe that all the examinations we had before. So this is the continuation of, of looking for things. That weren't permitted to enter into the Golden Land. (They laugh.)

ALLEE: What did you do, uh, on the Island when you were there? Did you meet, other--

YELLIN: We were socializing a great deal with the people, with the immigrants. I remember we had good time we had bad

times we had, uh, we had all kinds of things but at this time we were immune to everything. We went through so much torture most of the people were in do much torture before they got on the boat not only the examinations but the life we had in general in Europe. And besides that hope to be in America was so great and so, so funny that it colored all the pain that we had during our trip. Of course, it was lots of trouble and suffering but there was a light within, in the soul, that gave us courage to go on. Now. Now I will tell you the day we got off the boat. It was a nice sunny day, my sister and my brother came to take us off the boat. Then I stepped off the boat, not the boat really, it was the Island and when I stepped on the American soil I was so happy. Everything looked so beautiful. Even the ride in the taxi and seeing all the huge buildings which I had never dreamed to see looked so artistic and glorious to me and finally we got home. We came to our sister, she had a big apartment of six rooms and we were quite comfortable. My parents had a room and I had a room, a bedroom. And we were happy to be here. Not a short time after that, my sister came, Shirley, and she was with us too. And the first thing I remember, what I wanted to do is register in a school. I

didn't know English. I did know a little bit because I, before I left Bialystock I started to learn English. And how did I learn English? There's no comparison with the English. Now for instance, when I was home, somebody said, "What's the matter with you?" I say, "What does that mean?" So my, somebody in the family, I asked them to write down. And I started to read and I read, "What is the matter with you?" And you say. "What's the matter with you? That sounds Greek to me. How do you speak your English? You don't even speak correctly." (She laughs.)

And I decided right away to go to school. But conditions weren't very good for us. My father took sick. The fall that he had while making a garden during the German's government or the Germans, the German's stay in Bialystock when he fell off the tree injured him. And that injury what came back when we arrived in this country. And he was taken to the hospital. He was given a brace and he couldn't work anymore. So my sister and I had to go to work and help the family. Although we stayed with my sister and it didn't cost us to rent and it's probably no food it didn't cost us anything, but still we needed money besides food and rent and so I learned sewing when I was a kid. Now in Europe, to be a worker it's not a very

honorabile thing to be a worker. Of course, we all think to be professionals. We glorified the professional and belittle the worker. So, my family didn't think that it would nice for me to be a dress maker. But I wanted to learn the trade because my older sister would make me clothes and I always had to do favors for her so that I can get something that she'll do for me. And that didn't appeal to me. I say, "Why do I have to ask favors if I can do it myself?" That was the make-up of my personality. So I use, I can remember the dressmaker that made clothes for us. We had a private dress maker. At that time that was the rule, it wasn't because it was expensive, it was cheaper that way. And I would come there and pick up scraps from the floor and make little bags and little dolls and so on. So you, my mother didn't want me to go there to learn the trade. But between class, school, after school, I would go down for a few hours and learn. Watch them, how they sew. So I learned how to sew. It's one, I always felt that one doesn't learn through learning much, it's your desire. And my desire was great, so I learned a little, then, when I cam here I, my family advised me to go and start sewing in a private dress making establishment. My brother-in-law's

family were quite well to do and they used to make clothes there so she took me and I was sewing but my mind and my eyes were all over the room. There were about six, seven women there working. And I used to have a certain excuse watching them. How they prepared the work. I've learned it in a short time. Within one year I, the, Mrs. Feiglebaum was the name, the owner of the sewing establishment, she would take me every Saturday, downtown to New York to the big department stores where they make beautiful clothes. The rich, uh, Fifth Avenue, Bonwitt Teller and she said, "You watch these gowns and you come Monday and you do things like this. Try to design things." And that's exactly what I did. For me it was great deal. She would take me downtown and treat me to lunch and take me to all the stores but she meant for her benefit which I found out a little later. Well, anyhow my mind was to learn. I didn't care under what circumstances I learned. I remember once I saw a wrap. It was from blue silver cloth, brocade. Brocade cloth. And it, it was wrapped in cords around the neck just like, a Mary Stuart collar, extended collar, but it was just one piece. Just short through cords, you know? And the collar was extended and that was a wrap. An opera wrap. I came

Monday, and in a few days I made the wrap. From that time on, the rich people who came to try on the clothes to fit, she would also take me in the fitting room and I was helping her. I became more helper or second hand. I worked there for six years. Five years, six years. It was not, we lived at that time on Prospect Avenue, the Bronx, and I and my sister lived on the corner of Prospect. And I could come for lunch I had a home and I had a place to work and at night I went to school. I went to school and in school, yes, and after that I think my, uh, my sister-in-law, my brother kept company at that time and his bride worked as a draper in a shop. And she said she'll take me in and I'll make more money. So I went to work with her. I didn't understand yet, I didn't know but I learned the trade by, by coming from place to place to work. And that's how I learned everything. I got my experience if I worked in a place and they didn't like certain things and I asked them what they didn't like and they sent me away, so I got myself another job. At that time, I knew already the mistake I made and I didn't do that mistake but I made another mistake. And so I have learned to be a good worker. I was very conscientious. I remember coming home at night, I didn't, how many times I

lost my way. I had to take a bus and a subway to get home from downtown to Prospect Avenue. I didn't get the right train in the beginning so I, I, I went places that I have never been and I have learned the city by getting lost, actually. And I came home I was tired, very tired. But never mind tired, I have to go to school. And when the time came I went to school. I registered at the high school on Prospect Avenue there was a high school. And when I got there I picked up a few subjects that appealed to me and I remember one subject. It was the last subject of the evening and I fell asleep. Most of the time I fell asleep because I was so tired. And the teacher, his name was Durkin. And at the end of the semester he gave me a passing mark so I came over and I said, "Mr. Durkin, I don't deserve this mark, I used to sleep in your class." I say, "I don't know it." He says, "Never mind, you know. You know, it's okay, you take it." I argued with him because he gave me a passing mark. See, in those years because I, I really didn't know the subject well enough. Because everything I have learned I had to know well myself, never mind for the marks. And that's the way I didn't get a degree but I went through all the classes and I made out, in some subjects I made well. That was the

beginning of my life in the United States. And I worked by day, long hours, and went to school at night and I was happy. For several years, now, now we're going back to my social life. Saturday and Sunday was the time to socialize. So where do we go? We belonged to a Russian group of people and they had dances and masquerade parties and what not and I loved it. I'll show you my pictures with the masquerade costume. We would dance. We would dance Saturday and then come home and by this time my brother-in-law, who had a restaurant, would prepare a meal for us. A meal we would get salami, pastrami all kinds of goodies and wine. He made his own wine. And I didn't know how to drink wine. Because at home in Bialystock my father would make the blessing over the wine on Friday night and every one of us would get just a taste of the wine. And that's all I knew about wine but nothing else.

When I came to my, to my sister and brother-in-law we used to make wine just like, the wine was white, from white grapes. Was just like cognac, it was delicious. So he puts a tea glass in front of me, fills it up and he says, "Drink." I say, "I can't drink that." I cried. And he said, "Your gonna cry, but your gonna drink it." And that's how he taught me how to drink wine. So Friday,

Saturday night he would get the wine on the table and all kinds of salamis and we would come home with boys, naturally we couldn't come home alone, we were two live wires, I'll show you the pictures. Saturday night, and then get up early, wow, we didn't get up, how many times we didn't go to bed and spend the day and Sunday night again dancing. So Saturday and Sunday, that was the fun.

Now, I, I didn't know how to go around with men. I was, I didn't have the experience. you know, because my, I was brought up in a religious home and, and you just keep away. You don't know how to kiss, you don't know how to flirt, you don't know anything. But I guess we were attractive enough that men would, would come around and so one day to a lecture, yes, so why, I would study, that was more important to me than going out socially. And lectures, one day, I belonged to a club where they lectured, all kinds of lectures, and I go there. And there I met a young man, very handsome, clean cut guy, but he's an American. He was, he had beautiful qualities, he was a gentleman. And I think I kissed him maybe after three months or five months I knew him. And he, he looked to be like a fine person but his cultural background didn't appeal to me. He wasn't as smart, he wasn't as

efficient, he wasn't to my liking. But he was so good to me and loved me so dearly that his love brought me to the feeling of liking him a little, tolerating, I would rather say. But there's something about him that I didn't like.

He was, he came from a very fine family. A Russian people family. He was studying the piano. He played the piano. He played the organ. His father was a plain iron worker but he was a, composed music. It was a musical family. That appealed to me. When he brought me to his home I saw that he comes from a very nice family. But I still couldn't see myself tying my life with a person that is, I don't mean culturally, but maybe I would say a different category of character. He was experienced in life. He wasn't a man of (inaudible) (she laughs) so to say, I can't find the right word now, but, uh, something stuck, maybe because he wasn't from the same background. From the same culture of understanding things or so on.

To make the story short, at that time I was, let's say go at night school, then I was still taking courses at night in high school and then it was raining and in New York it rains cats and dogs. It was impossible to get home even.

He would be there with an umbrella, waiting for me to take me home. Now, it's, something appealed to me because

of the constant attention he gave me. And he said he loved me dearly, which he showed it too. Now, I guess I was his first girl. He was an American kid who also (inaudible) a life, a nice life. He wasn't socially well developed. I would assume because at that time they had balls, and landsleit, people from your own country they would make ball and my parents and I and my sister would go to the balls and a few times I invited him but he wouldn't go and he was a good dancer. And I liked him for his dancing. Every place I went there where was dancing, the girls envied me because he was so handsome and such a good dancer. And so many times I'd tell him, "Why don't you go with this girl, with that girl?" No, he wouldn't dance with anybody but me. Now, so he was afraid to go to the ball, he wasn't socially, I don't know, developed enough. And I didn't like that neither. So, I, I went to the ball and he asked me where I was going so I told him.

I'm going to this and this hall. I went, my sister, my parents, we had a good time, we walked out, to go home, he was there, to take me home. He's a very unusual character. Now, he was a vegetarian by the way. It didn't bother me, but every time he would come to our house and we had dinner he was invited. My mother felt

sorry for him. What kind of guy is that he eats greens, leaves, (she laughs) you know? They didn't, but they liked him as a person but his whole behavior wasn't to our culture. For five years he was after me. Five years, I gave him up. I do remember once that I went with my mother in Bronx Park, at that time we lived in that neighborhood. We moved out already from sister's, see, and they had an apartment of our own. Because myself and my sister were working. Supporting the family. And I walked through the zoo there and there he is following me and he wanted to come over and I ran away and I walked away with my mother. She said to me, "Here's Louie, he wants to talk to you." I say, "Ma, let's get away, I don't want. I don't want to talk to him, I've made up my mind. He's not for me and forget it, that's all." We came home a little while later a telegram arrived for me and it said, "If you're not calling me I'm going to commit suicide." Well, I say, "If he wants to commit suicide, let him," I say. "Maybe it's the best thing for him. That's it." But my mother insisted. "You're going to take the life of an innocent boy, call him." So I called him, I called him, he cried, he wants to see me. I say, "It's no use. Nothing will come out, why do you want to

see me?" So, "Let me see you." Okay, he saw. Now there was another thing about him. He played the piano, he played the organ and he couldn't find a job and he didn't work. And he worked and he stayed at working a day. So, some other things that I didn't like about him. Finally he decided that he would go and take an electric. Take up electric. Now that, and he didn't have all the money, I say, "Look, I'll give you the money. I want to see if you can do it. You pay me back whenever you have it." Fine.

I think I gave him two hundred dollars. That's all I had. And he went to school and graduated and this is the only school that he graduated, besides, of course he graduated high school. And baccalaureate, and you find a job. At that time came from Russia a Professor Theremin, maybe you know? He brought from Russia the Theremin Instrument. It's the kind of an instrument it looks like a box of a radio, and it has an iron bar and you play. The vibrations of your body comes in contact with the electricity and you produce sounds of music. It's still preserved here in, in the park, see. And it's also in Russia. Now he came to develop the instrument. And there wasn't a radio yet. I mean the, the television wasn't here. And the RCA was working on, uh, uh, to develop the

television. So he got an option with the RCA to work on television with Professor Theremin. T-H-E-R-E-M-I-N. And he also was connected with the society, uh, P.G. Morgan's niece. She was playing the instrument and it, it looked like a big future for this, uh, Professor Theremin. He got into this society. Now he gave a concert in Carnegie Hall in New York and he asked me to come with him to the concert and I went.

ALLEE: The Professor?

YELLIN: No, Louie, my boyfriend, because he was interested in music. And we came to the concert. It was magnificent. And there was Professor Theremin and Dr. Goldberg and Mrs., oh, I forgot her name. This society lady and she was sponsoring him. She was helping him. And they all played. I don't think that she was there already but I know that he and Dr. Goldberg, the one he worked for. Now, after the concert it was a magnificent experience, it sounds like a cello. Anybody can play it. You don't have to know notes. It's the fo, the feeling just like a whistle. People whistle beautiful because they have that feeling. And the same thing you express in playing this

instrument. Just by feelings. At the end the Professor asks anybody who wants to come up and try it, they can do so. So, a violinist went up, an opera singer went up, another person, I don't remember, all in the professional, in the musical line. And my Louie, my boyfriend, went up there. Nobody could play the instrument but he played immediately. As soon as he touched the box there was a vibration and music. Music comes out, see? And what happened?

ALLEE: We have to turn the tape, I'm sorry. End of the first side of tape two.

END OF SIDE ONE TAPE TWO

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO TAPE TWO

ALLEE: It's the beginning of side two of tape two of the interview with Gertrude Yellin. Yes, go ahead.

YELLIN: Well, let's see, where was I? Okay. Now the Professor was very impressed and he right away came over and he asked him his name and his telephone number, his address. And he gave it to him. And the very

same evening when he got home the Professor called him. He would like to see him in his studio. So he went and he told him his background in music. He told him also that the school, electrical school, that he had the knowledge, and he hired him immediately. "I want you to work in our studio. We will be four people." He, Dr. Goldberg, and Mrs., oh, lets' call her Miller, Mrs. Miller and he. And that's, his life began in music. He got a job, he worked, he was happy, he was accepted in the higher society. So that's the time I decided to marry him after five years. The letters he used to write to me. I would go away on vacation, never want to see him. But he would write me that he is on the grass thinking of me and loving me, what not, letters galore. Anyhow, okay, I will not go on now with story, further, because our time is limited.

ALLEE: But you married him.

YELLIN: I married him and the first year was very good, very happy year, he was working and he made the , he made a living and we were very happy. But after two years the Professor did not succeed in the United States and he was forced, actually, by conditions, to go back to Russia. And he was out of a job. Now he was out of a job but they never gave up that instrument. The Professor gave it up in the United States but he said that he was going to

bring it back to life. So what did he do? He started to play on the radio. They would hire him but they didn't pay him anything. They didn't pay him any salary but they hoped that if a sponsor will come along that will pay wages. In the meantime he had to carry that, he had the instrument at home. He had to take a cab in New York City to go to various stations, pay for the cab and all the expenses, in the meantime he didn't work. So that was the time it became a very difficult time. You see? And he did not want to go to work. Any kind of work didn't suit him. My family offered to take him the restaurant business or something. No. And by this time I had a baby, you know? And, uh, and the family liked me very much and his mother was with me, the whole family was with me, but that's all he wanted, just music. And when there is a women knocking on the door for, for bread you cannot think of music. I mean our home, and that's how things happened. Well anyhow, to make this story short, he didn't live very long. He got, uh, uh, a touch of spinal meningitis and in those years there was no cure they didn't have the penicillin and within two days he died. But this is the story of my, part of my story of, of my husband, children, marriage. Now I will go back to the

period of my own life. Where I tried to make, achieve my desired education. I, I went, I, I, only college, I didn't want to go to lower schools. I went to City College in, it wasn't the regular course but in the evening. All in the evening. Because by day I had to work. I went to City College. I registered there for English. And I do remember that I was a very good student and we used to write the teacher. Fitzpatrick was his name. Professor Fitzpatrick. And he gave us stories to write. And my stories were read for the class. I do remember him saying, "Here's a, here is a person that came from the old country who didn't know English and look at the composition she writes. It's beautiful. You Americans, what do you produce? You're so happy to be Americans but you don't show any desire in learning and writing," and so on. That I remember exactly. Yes, I went there for some time at City College. Now let me see, but then I was, I still have a child and I still had to work and I was left without money. Yes, and before, there are millions of episodes in my life that it's really good for a movie to, or for a story on the stage but not to talk. But since my time is limited I want to say that I had two children by then, before he died. And I had a boy

and a girl. And I became Papa and Mama and, and supporter. And that was already a difficult life for me. But I didn't give up. During those years I went to school to learn designing. I got my diploma, designer. Where I learned sketching, writing, reading, cutting and, and what else is there? Pattern making. All I took in and I, I never worked in a shop but I worked in a designing room. I was for many years a sample maker and then I became as assistant designer. During the, the recession of 1929, when people were out of work searching for a piece of work, I didn't care, even though I was already a first class worker and worked in a designing room I went to the shop and became even a finisher. Only to get a few pennies, a few days work. And I wasn't out of work one day, because if I still feel that anybody that wants to work can find work. Not the work you want to work or want to get or not the amount of money. But you can still find work. I remember I worked at 1400 Broadway. That's where the, all the, the designing rooms, the needle trade. I walked up 23 floors and I stopped on every floor and I knocked in every door and there was one firm that hired me. So that was my life. There was no lack of anything but still I didn't reach my goal to go to

school and become educated. So for all these years in the meantime my daughter grew up and when she was about eighteen years she fell in love with a young man in, in school, in high school yet. She wanted to get married. I was against the marriage. I was against the person she was going to marry, but she was in love and I didn't want to stop her. So, I gave her a wedding and she got married. And after she got married, of course, I was a little relieved from my duties and then I announced to my family that I'm going back to school. I gave up my job, by this time I was already an assistant designer, I was making money and I also belonged to a union. I dropped my union book. I became nobody in that line. But I became somebody in my desires to go on with my study. I registered at a Jewish Theological Seminary of America and I went back to the Hebrew language, was the language of my childhood and I registered and, and then I read these stories. At that time I had all these stories with me that I had written as a kid. I couldn't understand. If it wasn't for my had writing, I would think that somebody else wrote it. That's how much I forgot from all that I went through. But desire is the strongest weapon. The strongest tool to achieve your goals. And that's it. I

didn't care, I studied and studied. I gave up my home. I gave up everything. And I went to school. At the first year I didn't make out well. And the second year I made out very well and I, then the cold weather came along. The cold weather came along in New York and I got sick and the slush and the rain and the pain and all that. I decided to go to California. I say, "I'm going to make life in a warmer climate." I took a transfer from the Theological Seminary of America in New York and I went to L.A. In L.A. is the, the University of Judaism. It's a branch from that school. I registered there and then I came, you know, I had a home I had a kitchen, I had everything out there, I had a little room on the campus. My bed, half the size of this. I had no frigidaire, I had no kitchen, I had no stove. But I had a swimming pool and I had a library. And the library became my friends, and the swimming pool, no the library became my God and my friends and that's where I spent most of the time. Imagine. I lived on top and down below is the library. You know what that means? Down way below is a swimming pool. So I exchanged for all these women's luxuries for these two luxuries. And I studied day and night. And I walked in I wasn't such a good student but I walked out

with the highest marks. I had B plus in Talmud. If you tell me now to go to that study I would rather dig the soil with my teeth than go in to that, the most difficult study in the world. But not for me because I wanted, that was from childhood. I wanted to be educated. Well to make this story short, a course of four years I made in three years. And by this time I was also teaching at the Hollywood Synagogue. In Hollywood. A temple there in Hollywood, I, just, I'll show you one of my earliest things. And the, at that time they had a graduation for Rabbis, at that temple and I was invited. And I was introduced to a Rabbi here from San Diego. Rabbi Cohn. He was there with his wife and that Rabbi introduced me to this Rabbi and he told him what a wonderful teacher I am to be, so the Rabbi immediately asked me to come to San Diego to teach and his wife insisted. I said, "Look, if you give me one million dollars right now, I'm not leaving, I didn't get my degree yet." I had one more year to go. So when I got my degree I came to Rabbi Kramer and I told him, he says, "Mrs. Yellin if you want to go there I'm going to write a letter for you." And so he wrote and I'll show you the letter. And then at the end he wrote she is "zise n'eshome", that means sweet soul. (She

laughs.) So since that time I got letters from the Rabbi to the University where I was still there. Come, come, come. So, Rabbi Kramer says to me, "Go out and take a look, what have you got to lose?" I came here and they treated me royally. They took me all over, they dined me and they showed me apartments and, not only that, they made sure that I teach in every temple and Synagogue in San Diego in order to make a living because, you know, what do you get in a temple, you get very small wages and just a few hours a week. Anyhow, I came here and I started to teach. I started to teach, like I said, in every temple. I made out, okay, made fine living. Then I decided I, I know Russian so well why can't I teach Russian? And why do I have to teach the kids? Anyhow, I went back, yeah, by this time when I started to teach Hebrew I decided to be a good teacher is not enough to, to graduate one college of Hebrew, I have to graduate a college of English as well. So I registered at the San Diego City College. And to make this story short, anyhow, it wasn't easy for me because they are a bunch of youngsters and at my age, you know, to remember exams, the exams killed me, why, multiple choice, true or false. I said, "What kind of exam is that?" It's a guessing deal,

I used to fight with the teachers. I said, "Give me an essay, I want to express myself. I want to say what I want to say. What I am, what I feel. Not true or false or--." So the answer was, "Takes too long, takes too much time." And you see at that time, yes, wait, I didn't get it, yeah, I registered in City College and I graduated and when I registered I didn't have even a high school diploma. So, when I came to the principal I told here she said, "Don't worry, just put down that you lost it on the way coming over to this country." S I did, you know. And then I walked out from City College I was B, A, and B. That was my degree but I worked hard, very hard. But it was good, was my best years. All right, now, let's go further. But then I went, yeah, so I had, I already, I didn't have my degree but during my going to City College I, I worked during my going to City College. I registered at San Diego State University because I wanted to get a credential to teach Russian. I took up one course of Russian in City College. But I knew Russian I only needed the, the credentials to get, so I went to State College and I registered there. And from there I got my credentials to teach Russian. Then I got my credentials I went to the city schools and told them that I have a

credential and I want to teach Russian. So the principal said, "Bring me your transcript." I wrote to the University, Hebrew University, send me the transcript and I brought it. He said, "Give me a few days to look it over." He looked over the transcript and I came for a decision, for final decision and he says to me like this, I'll never forget, "Mrs. Yellin with a transcript like this you want to teach Russian. I'd rather have you teach Hebrew." I said, "It didn't dawn on me because they never had Hebrew in the city schools. In college. In high school." I meant. He says, "Look, I'll be honest with you because you have a terrific transcript of all the education you have and all the various subjects but you'll have to help me. I couldn't do it myself." "What can I do? I'll do anything." I said, "You have to get me thirty students. A list of thirty students that want to learn Hebrew. Then I'll open the class." Because to open a class cost money. A lot of money and I can't waste it.

And what do you think, I didn't do it. I mobilized the mothers of the children because I was teaching in the temples so I had to make meetings and mobilize the mothers's of the children and got the a part. And here and there, I didn't get all the thirty, maybe I had

eighteen or nineteen. I brought it to Mr. Bradshaw, the principal, and I tell him, "This is all I can get for the time being. Do you want to give me a chance?" He says, "Of course I'll give you a chance." He opened the class. The first night came one fellow. And who came to learn Hebrew? Christians. Mostly Christians, religious Christians. An engineer came by himself and I gave him the first lesson, you know, they were all very enthusiastic. I give myself whole heartedly. This is my nature. I used to tell to my students a little later on we, how we developed. I used to tell them, "You're lucky to have me. Because I'm a loving creature. My family, studying, to love. I love you all and I have to give myself to you." They used to get a kick out of me. And that, anyhow, I had lots of favors from my students. They would take me to the school and from the school home. I never drove. I never learned to drive. Because I was always busy. So, anyhow, let's go to, back to the subject. This engineer says to me I told them the very first night when I opened the class at Hoover High School, they said to me, I said this, "Now this is the situation, if you want to have this class, if you like to learn Hebrew you'll have to help me." The next day, the same

engineer brought four people, three people in addition, himself, his wife, his friend and his friend's wife. I had already four people. And so little by little I built up the class. I started with Hoover High School in the evening, one class a week on Thursday. Very soon I had two classes a week and then I had a morning class. And then I spread farther. I went to, from Hoover High School to Grossman High School, Helix High School and Jewish Community Center. And that's how I formed my classes from nothing and I was the first one to create the classes of Hebrew. Now we have already, but at that time I was the first one. But I did work hard. Okay, now let's get back to, Mr. Bradshaw. I was teaching already there, Russian, and I still kept on going to school. I kept on going by this time I graduated, I'm going to show you my graduation. My graduation, my first graduation where I was the, my college graduation, my family came from New York to my graduation. And I want to tell you I was the queen of the ball. I carried the degree lovingly to my heart. I graduated. That was the first graduation in L.A. of the University of Judaism. My second graduation was just as beautiful. They also came from New York to my graduation and that was here in San Diego from City

College. Now when I, I was so busy teaching and learning that that was my life and then from that I had a family, my students were my friends. I'll give you a paper to read what one of my students write. "Mrs. Yellin, you are my friend, my teacher, and my Jewish mama." (She laughs.) You know? And she was Catholic. Okay, now, so what can I tell you? Until this day, I am still getting letters and cards, birthday cards, Christmas cards from students that were, that were my students the year of 1965. And I also have been teaching people, all kinds of people. Ministers, Priests, I'll show you the letters of the, of the Saint Augustine School, the Catholic school, it's a high school. And one of them, the vice principal of the school, Mr. Sullivan and also I mean Reverend Sullivan and Reverend Neely, you see, he was a teacher of Latin they were my students. Uh, he, I will show you the pictures of the holidays that I celebrated with my students. I used to make every holiday we, cell, celebrated in a big way. We would have at least sixty students from all the classes that I had and we would have food. Traditional food of each holiday. Like Chanukah we would have lotkes. And we had a bar of Manischewitz wine. (She laughs.) We had fun galore. And, and the, and this was my life. This was a

beautiful life for me. And I had three beautiful days in my life. The first one was the graduation of my daughter from college, Hunter College in New York. It was raining, pouring. I was dressed in a pure silk grey dress. The rain had such a respect for me that when I ran to the subway I didn't even get wet. It was too much warmth within me to keep the rain away.

ALLEE: He's telling us we have three more minutes, so.

YELLIN: Okay, three more minutes. Now what do you want know?

ALLEE: Actually, your story has been extremely complete. And I really don't have a whole lot of questions.

YELLIN: Yeah, I also will tell you that, uh, I was honored as the Woman of Valor by the Church Reunited because of my activities in here, and here you have the article that was written about me. There was also, there were also many articles written about me. There are many articles that I wrote about holidays and other things in various, uh, they'll know, it's good to know, it's good to feel that way. You see, I'm alone. I have no family. Nobody of family is here. I have a very small family in New York. What would I do if not for my achieving the goal of my life? It's a, it's

an internal light that warms within. That will never die. It is life achieving from school no matter how much trouble you have in life, it's worth while doing, that's my recommendation to young people. Don't give up, even when it's rainy and stormy. The sun comes out at the end, eventually.

In everybody's life. There is only one thing, to be hopeful and to believe in yourself and in your abilities and also believe in God's help. Do I have any more time to--

ALLEE: No, that's about it. Well thank you, that was a very good interview.

YELLIN: Did you ever have anybody as, person like me, courageous?

ALLEE: You're certainly extremely courageous. Let me just end the tape. This is the end of Interview Number 144 with Gertrude Yellin. It is now 1:30 and it's February 10th.