

KECK-155  
HEDWIG THOMISSER  
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INTERVIEWER: EDWARD APPLEBOME  
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AUSTRIA, 1922  
AGE 18  
PASSAGE ON "THE ORDUNA"

APPLEBOME: This is Edward Applebome and I'm speaking with Miss Hedwig Thomisser on Tuesday, February 11, 1986. We are beginning this interview at about 10:25 in the morning. We are about to interview Miss Thomisser about he immigration experience from Austria in 1922. Miss Thomisser can you tell me where and when you were born?

THOMISSER: I was born in Austria in Burgenland (?) in 1904, in a little town called Jabing.

APPLEBOME: Could you spell the name of the town?

THOMISSER: J-A-B-I-N-G.

APPLEBOME: And what was it like growing up in that town?

THOMISSER: Well, my parents had five children, two boys and three girls, I was the youngest. How I envied my friends who had at least one little sister or brother. During the summer my sister and brother were away from home to earn a livelihood. We belonged at that time to Hungary but to make a living, everyone went to Austria. We spoke the German language like Austria, only in school we spoke Hungarian. My older sister Anna worked in a factory till she got married, the older brother Joseph became a bricklayer, the younger brother Anton became a carpenter and sister Teresa, with the help of distant relative, landed in New York before the First World War at the age of sixteen. She lied about her age, she said she was eighteen which was possible in those days.

APPLEBOME: What kind of work did your father do?

THOMISSER: My father had no trade at all but he knew everything. Father was away in the summer, father always, he had come for the house, always worried when the snow laid on the roof that it was too heavy for the house and might collapse, he said he used, he used a long pole and fastened a board across on one end of the pole in the form of a hoe and pulled the snow down. When they bought the house sometime before they were married, it

was very new, but later discovered that those were, that there were unfired bricks between the good bricks, the raw bricks softened from the cold and dampness in the winter, the bricks couldn't be seen, there was cement over, then painted. Before the War, father already bought the wood for the roof on the new house and the War broke out, he couldn't go on with the building. Building material couldn't be had, the man went to war, during the War father was worried and was weak pulling down the snow from the roof. After the War this was, there was for years no material and no money. When the wood for the roof was inspected and could not be used for such purposes anymore, in sadness he cut it up for firewood.

APPLEBOME: And what do you remember about the town, did you go to school there?

THOMISSER: Yes I went to school there. We had only two classrooms, one was for the younger ones the other for the older ones and just one teacher in every room and we were about eighty, ninety children there.

APPLEBOME: What kind of games did you play?

THOMISSER: We played ball.

APPLEBOME: Would you play with your sisters and brothers?

THOMISSER: Well, no, my sisters and brothers, they were already older, I was the youngest. So by the time I was about to play they were already grown, they had to go out early in life to make a living. In fact I had a brother, my younger brother was already minding the cows for a farmer in the neighboring town and he was seven years old and my mother thought as long as he was away from the table, that's all she expected but when he came home he even had a new hat which the farmer gave him. Well, my very first chores was that I had to close the chicken coop at night and that one night I forgot and I woke up during the night and I thought of it and I wanted to go out there but I was afraid of the dark so I waited for mother to get up but I didn't want her to notice me either, she would scold me and so I was just a little bit ahead of her and so I thought she wouldn't see me but she did anyway by going out the door and so on and so when I wanted to rush over to the chicken coop, the chickens were already out and so she scolded me right there, five o'clock in the morning (she laughs).

APPLEBOME: What would happen if the chickens got out of chicken coop?

THOMISSER: Well they were out already, they were in the yard but she wanted to feed the others first and then later because I don't know,

they were fighting with each other or what it was.

APPLEBOME: Did you have any other animals?

THOMISSER: Oh yes, we had pigs and we had rabbits and we had a few cows and my, I remember when I was seven years old, my father brought home the first cow. I remember I was so happy that I jumped up and down and said, "Now we are farmers, now we are farmers." But we couldn't keep the cow in the winter, that took too much food, we didn't have that much yet, but then, later, a few years later he brought home another cow and another, we had three already. By the time he died in 1922, he had quite a little farm together.

APPLEBOME: Did you grow crops also?

THOMISSER: Yes, I want to tell you something about how proud my father was with his cows. When he had to, see we worked with the cows over there, put them in the wagon and just I had to carry home everything from the field and the wood, we didn't have horses and he was so proud, he knew he had to take the cows out and put them in the wagon and go out for something. He would wash their tails, those cows were so clean and would

wash their tails, he had a wooden block that was just about the height he made it for the tail where the hair is on the bottom, he would lay that hair on there after its washed and he pounded with something to make it curly and my mother would pass by the stable there, when she saw he doing that she would say, "What kind of a ribbon do you want today?" (They laugh.)

APPLEBOME: Would he really put a ribbon on their tails?

THOMISSER: No, no he wouldn't, but she just joked and then he was so proud with those cows, he was so happy to have them that he was a farmer too, he was always very poor and the way we could always see when he showed his pride, he had a moustache and then he would be so proud standing there curling the moustache like that (she laughs).

APPLEBOME: The rabbits, were they for pets or for eating?

THOMISSER: They were for eating.

APPLEBOME: Did you take care of the rabbits?

THOMISSER: Yes, I had to do that too, then after the chicken coop came that, that I had to take care of the rabbits and we had geese and I had to take the geese to a certain meadow everyday, that was my job, that they

called me gooseman, minding Heddy (?) because I was always going with my geese and we had a creek there which was quite a good size and when I came home with them, from the meadow I had to get them to the creek which I didn't have to get them, they were just flying there. But they wanted to go into the water.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember anything about the First World War?

THOMISSER: Oh yes, a lot. I remember when I wore sandals (?) we couldn't get no shoes, no leather, no sole and there was a man who quite handy in making the sole part from wood. He made it quite nice, even the little heel on it, but there was no leather and so my mother had a homespun, which she spun herself, homespun linen and there's one part that is quite rough, they call it the rough linen that was for, for potato sacks and such things, but we used that rough linen and cut a piece off and blackened it, we didn't have no dye and no shoe polish, we blackened it with the soot of the chimney.

APPLEBOME: Was there any fighting that went on near your village?

THOMISSER: No, there was no fighting, we were far, far away from that.

APPLEBOME: But were some of the young men drafted into the army?

THOMISSER: Oh yeah, sure, oh yes, everybody was going. There were  
a lot of dead, heard about it, you know, that  
another one died and so it was something awful.

APPLEBOME: After the war, what happened?

THOMISSER: Well, after the war there was just nothing to be had,  
no jobs, all those soldiers came back, the younger ones didn't even have  
clothes to wear because what they had before they grew out of it and--

APPLEBOME: Were you still in school?

THOMISSER: Yeah sure because I was ten years old in 1914, the War  
started and I was ten years old.

APPLEBOME: And you continued going to school through the War?

THOMISSER: Oh, yes, yeah, yeah, in fact, I said once, "I wish the  
War would get so bad that  
the teacher would have to go to War too then we wouldn't have to go to  
school," and the, of all things my mother went to church in the morning and

a couple of women passed the teacher and he said, "Lady," she went to church so he said, "Ladies, pray for me that I don't need to go to War," and my mother said, "Oh my Heddy said she wishes you would have to go," (she laughs) and then he told me that in front of all the school children that I would think such a thing, to say such a thing.

APPLEBOME: You must have been very embarrassed?

THOMISSER: (She laughs.) Naturally.

APPLEBOME: And after the War, in your village, what went on, the boys came back?

THOMISSER: There was nothing to be had and people stole, who would never have thought before of that, but they were hungry and so everything had to be just kept under lock all the time and Austria is rich in industry, you now, therefore everybody went to work there but Hungary is rich in soil, has a very fertile soil and they grow everything and they didn't know anything of starvation, in Austria they just starved. And so they got the idea, oh and Hungarians had no salt, I think that Russia took the salt mine away from them and they were

without salt, so those people that were out of work, women too, not only the soldiers that came back, they got an idea, they went to Austria for salt, took it over the border to Hungary and traded in for flour and took it back to Austria and like this they made a living. Of course, a lot of times it was taken away from them on the border. We had two borders, Burgenland (?) was like an isle because they were fighting, we didn't know yet where we belong, to Austria or Hungary, so there was a border in the Hungarian, in the Austrian side from us and another border on the Hungarian side and anything taken out from the country they didn't want. Hungarian didn't want their's to take out, austria was, they took the salt from there but it wasn't much but sometimes that was taken away too. And so that was their living for quite a while.

APPLEBOME: Your family was very poor also?

THOMISSER: Well we had enough to eat all the time because it counted we had the farm. If we didn't have what we wanted in everything but we had enough all the time and then--

APPLEBOME: Why did your family decide to leave your village?

THOMISSER: Wit a minute, I wanted to say something interesting here, what did I--. Oh, my brother, who was also doing that "smuggling", we called it, he was doing quite well and he had an idea. I was a sixteen year old girl, quite tall and skinny, so he said he wanted to stuff me out with food to take over the border, so he told my mother to make a sack like a pillowcase and put flour in it, about half way full and sew it up and that flour I had put around here but my clothes wouldn't fit me then but my mother was shorter and stout, so I had to put her clothes on and that really, it made me feel good, I wanted to be stout and have curves and that really gave me curves. And like this, we went to the border, that time, we went by train, we wanted to get off the station before the border and then walk over the border (?). But the patrol surprised us and they came in before we got off and my brother had a goose in his coat-lining, a dead goose, he told my mother to make a pocket in his old, worn winter coat to sew it up on the sides and the bottom and the top open and that makes a nice pocket and there he had the goose in it so when the patrol came they just touch you around. They didn't find my flour but they found his goose and they took it away.

APPLEBOME: Were you afraid?

THOMISSER: Of course, we were always on the border, you just always shiver you were so afraid, but then a good thing that we could go there to the border and from, I mean that we could go easy across the border, you know, they had examined us already and from there we still had a two hour walk to the place where we want to deliver those things and that was such a hard job for me because the way I carried that flour and it would roll down here, it was like a tire around here and the bottom part because the skirt was in the center, the bottom part was wriggling around there too, just falling to the bottom.

APPLEBOME: Once you crossed the border, couldn't you take it out and have your brother carry the sack?

THOMISSER: No, because it was at night and I don't know, it was cold in the winter and I would have to get undressed, we just kept on going. But then the next time we got smarter, I did that again a few times but we sewed the pillowcase with the flour in it, made a flap and stitched it through like a quilt, then the flour wouldn't move around like that and then sewed a strap on it to put over the shoulder, then it was easy to carry.

APPLEBOME: Did your brother share some of the profits with you?

THOMISSER: Oh, of course.

APPLEBOME: Good. Let's get to the part now where you decided to leave Austria. Why was that?

THOMISSER: Well, in count of that house that it was falling down, uh, my, when my father died in 1920 and my mother was so worried that winter from '21 to '22 about what will we do when that house collapses on our head, and this and that, and then people went already to the, the post office was already open but then it happened that we heard that America opened its doors again for the immigrants. Then everybody, we left just by the dozens and I wasn't eighteen years old yet so I couldn't go but I kept on hinting around and then I promised my mother, I said, "If I could go to america, too, I'd send the money home," because we thought that you just grab it up here, the money, you know, I'd send the money home to build anew house." Well, she didn't ant anything more than that and so we decided that I would go but then we still had to wait, through '22 October because on October 16 I was eighteen years old. So I wanted to go with boat before that would arrive earlier than my birthday and I wouldn't be allowed in and so with that one boat I decided and arrived on Ellis Island on the 16th of October on my birthday.

APPLEBOME: Oh that's nice. First tell me about leaving your

village. What did you pack with you?

THOMISSER: Well, I packed with me, well, my sister sent me a material, white, very thin summer material with red embroidery in it and I made a dress, I had a dress made out of it and she sent me also a sweater, a purple sweater which was quite warm so that I was sure to take with me. And then, not much of other things just enough for the fare and I think that was just one suit anyway whatever it was, a dress and a little jacket over it and what everyone took along was a piece of our dark bread because they discovered in the boat when they are seasick they said, "Nobody, uh, nothing tastes better in your stomach than that rye bread, even if it is dry," and so we were sure to take that rye bread.

APPLEBOME: Was it a loaf that your mother baked?

THOMISSER: Yes, yes a big wheel, a loaf and she just cut a big hunk down and gave it a lot to me.

APPLEBOME: What had you heard about the United States, that you wanted to travel there?

THOMISSER: Oh the money, money, dollars, my goodness, that's all, money (she laughs).

APPLEBOME: That's what the people in your village thought?

THOMISSER: Well, not everybody, everybody over there, not just in my village. America was just for money.

APPLEBOME: Where did you travel to get the boat?

THOMISSER: Well, let's see. First we travelled to Vienna and then

I had some papers yet that had to be arranged and there they told me those papers were no good, I have to, because this is your signature, your writing with your mother's name, you wrote that, maybe your mother doesn't know about it. And I thought I dropped dead when they told me that's no good. And so she wouldn't believe me and I said, "Yes, I wrote it but mother told me so because I write better than she does," but they cannot go by that but we were a group and there were others too from my hometown and one man spoke up for me and he said, "We are all witnesses here, that her mother knows about it," and so they let me go.

APPLEBOME: Were these people taking care of you? The other people from your village that you were travelling with?

THOMISSER: No, I mean we had to shift for ourselves by which we tried to be together but they couldn't take care of me.

APPLEBOME: You were alone, there wasn't anybody else from your family?

THOMISSER: Oh, not from my family, no, they just went to the depot, that's all, that's far enough (he laughs) and that was extra money again, going to Vienna, my goodness, they couldn't afford that.

APPLEBOME: You were very brave to travel by yourself.

THOMISSER: That is nothing, I mean over there they were used to it for such things, wherever you could save a penny. But from there they travelled to Hamburg and we had to change at the border from Austria to Germany and even that time I noticed that in Austria, the train was poor which I didn't know before, that's all I saw was that one but when I went into, when I took the German train I thought I was third class, it was sort of

modern and streamline. In Austria there were wooden benches you know and the floor was so worn and there was a hole under there something, they nailed a board over it, you had to step over it which was no such thing in Germany, so Germany must have been richer than Austria was. And so in, we came to Hamburg and there, first we got into some little dining room where they served us some food and I know I had a glass of milk and something, I don't remember what we did, and then they put us in a big room where the corner of it, part of it was partitioned off but not very much partitioned, we still could see there were bathtubs there and there they had to give our clothes, get undressed and they fumigated our clothes because I came third class and first and second class didn't have to do that and we had to take a bath there, by the time we were through with the bath the clothes came back and we put it on and so on and then we had to go to the doctor for examination.

APPLEBOME: This is at Ellis Island now or in Hamburg still?

THOMISSER: In Hamburg.

APPLEBOME: That's what I thought.

THOMISSER: Then we came, we went to the doctor and when the doctor examined me and another doctor examined me and I think even a third one, I got the shock of my life. He said I have to come back tomorrow morning to see Doctor So and so and if that doctor, that doctor would tell me if I really could go to America. That was just, well I can't describe that feeling and then I didn't say anything to the others when we went back again, we slept in bunk beds and I was in the upper bunk and I prayed the whole night, every minute of it that I don't need to go back, that I go to America, then I thought, if I have to go back, I won't, I kill myself, I jump in the ocean. I passed by an ocean dead found, sometime before I saw the ocean already and I thought, I'm going to jump in there and where the ocean was it was just a street and there were houses already on this side and then that side a bit of a wall and there was the ocean and I thought, I'm going to jump in there. I had the idea the ocean is right away there as deep as I always thought the ocean is, you know, deep

and deep and deep. And the following morning when I went to the doctor, I passed by a fountain, I saw one in Vienna, that was not so big, and this was wide, quite big, had a little fence around, not too high and a fountain is called in German , springbrunne, brum means well and so I thought that's a well, at home I know a well was very big and this is so much wider that might be deeper yet so I thought, if I come out from that doctor and he tells me I can't go to America, why should I go to the ocean, I'm going to jump right here in that springbrunne (she laughs), imagine the splash that would have (she laughs)--but thank God the doctor told me I could go to America so I just thanked heavens when I passed by that springbrunne that it didn't have to claim me.

APPLEBOME: Do you think if they told you that you couldn't go, do you think you really would have--

THOMISSER: I really would, my mind was set and I would do it. And  
imagine if I had jumped in the ocean, that was the beach, that wasn't deep, so there I would have had the very same thing (she laughs).

APPLEBOME: Because you couldn't bare the thought of going back to your town?

THOMISSER: No, no I couldn't, I couldn't.

APPLEBOME: Okay, let's talk about the boat trip over.

THOMISSER: Okay, the boat trip. Let's see if I can renew my memory.

APPLEBOME: Okay. The boat that you took left from Hamburg?

THOMISSER: Yes it went from Hamburg.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember the name of the boat?

THOMISSER: "Orduna".

APPLEBOME: Spell that please.

THOMISSER: O-R-D-U-N-A.

APPLEBOME: How was the trip over?

THOMISSER: So, I know that I got seasick, the first one, we were four in the cabin, it was quite deep down because it was third class and one morning, was about the third day, I could hardly make it from that upper bed and I reached the floor and there I got seasick and my roommates who were my own country people, they got so mad at me, they said, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, why don't you go out?", and there I was so sick and in no time the steward came and cleaned it up and it was early in the morning, earlier than we would have gotten up and so I got myself washed somewhere, I don't know where and dressed. By the time it was for the others to get up and so one was sitting there in the bottom bunk and she looked so sick looking and I asked her, "Why don't you get up," you know, but she just couldn't and all of a sudden she got seasick too and I was so glad because before, they scolded me and, but then one after the other was seasick and I was thinking of that bread that I took along, but that was in the storeroom in my little, it was a good sized suitcase so I couldn't get hold of that. Am I talking too much?

APPLEBOME: No, you're talking wonderfully, but you know what, let's just take a break so we can flip the tape over okay? This is the end of side one of tape one of the interview with Miss Hedwig Thomisser.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

APPLEBOME: This is side two of tape one of the interview with Miss Hedwig Thomisser. Heddy, you were telling me about being on the boat and you were looking for the rye bread because everybody was getting seasick.

THOMISSER: Well, I remember that once I looked into the dining room, there was nobody in there, so everybody was seasick and they had quite rough days. I don't know, I even think back now why they don't have furniture in the dining room fastened. I looked in there once holding on and (?) the boat was going, the chairs and tables were sliding around in there but even to this day I think why didn't they have anything to fasten it.

APPLEBOME: Did you go on deck at all?

THOMISSER: Yes, but we had a deck but that was still quite low, you know, it was third class and the others were higher up.

APPLEBOME: Did you see any of the first or second class

passengers?

THOMISSER: We were not allowed to go in there. I think once there was something that we could see at least, that we could go there for an hour or whatever it was open, we could see what it is, but our windows in the, in our cabin couldn't even be opened because they were low down and even if it wasn't very windy, they still wouldn't leave it open. When it was a nice day, the steward would come in and open just for a little while and close it again. And then the deck there, well we were there during the day most of the time, it was just a wooden floor, quite rough and people, boys were playing, one had an accordion, another had a, oh some sort of an instrument and they put together a little band and it wasn't, nobody was really happy enough to dance or so on, I mean well enough to dance and but half the time--

APPLEBOME: What were some of the other countries that these other people were from?

THOMISSER: My goodness, from all over, I mean it was just nothing,

one was from another part of the world. Some were from the Western World.

APPLEBOME: Had you seen people like this from other countries before?

THOMISSER: No, I didn't.

APPLEBOME: What did you think?

THOMISSER: Well, I didn't think anything until I came to Ellis Island and saw the black people, but that made me think.

APPLEBOME: Okay, we'll get to that in a minute. So is there anything else you can say about the voyage over? What about when you got to New York Harbor?

THOMISSER: Well, for the few days, nobody could eat and there was not much enjoyment but then, I think it was the last two days, then once we heard, "Tomorrow, we're going to land in New York City, in Ellis Island," and goodness me, right away I thought, gee I'm going to wear my nice white dress that my sister sent me, the material for it, because it comes from America then I'm surely going to look American and the purple sweater (she

laughs). So during the day I asked the steward if he would open the storeroom for me, I had to take something out, which I did and well, I don't know, we did, you see I didn't know anything about the Statue of Liberty, that was just strange to me. I know that we were looking at the Statue there somewhere which I didn't pay much attention, it was just a statue and the other people who knew about it, not my own country people, maybe people who can, who were already here or whatever, so I know they marvelled over it and I think that was the Statue of Liberty, in fact, we ourselves, we were nine, uh, ten people and a woman, a mother with two children was home for a visit and she came back with us, so for her the Statue of Liberty meant something, you know, but for me it didn't. And then when we came to Ellis Island I know that we went into a big doorway and there was a man standing with some papers in his hand. We had to be more in line. He had a table there, in fact I remember it was a square table, there were papers, loose papers in every language and before me there was a man carrying an accordion and that man, that officer, whatever he was, he asked him, he said, "Are you going to sell that?" And he said, "No, it's my own," he said, "Then let me hear you play it." I guess that would have been, you know, against it if he would have sold it and so the man played the "Beer Barrel Polka," and then everyone was just going after the rhythm and it really shook us up, it was a good uplift because we were so downhearted, half-sick, you know. And then I came in line and the man said to me, "Sprechen sie Deutsche?" And I thought, how does he know I speak German and

then I said, "Yes." So he reached for a German newspaper and see if I could read so I just read one line and he let me pass and after that I know I was in a room, not too big a dormitory, maybe a dozen beds in it but all the beds were made. I think that was early in the morning and all the beds were made and I was told if I want to lie down and rest, I could do it and I don't think I stayed long in there because I had already my white dress on and I didn't want to muss that up, in those days they had to be ironed because they wrinkled up right away and I want to look nice when my sister going to pick me up. And then I know I was eating on a table and there was a big plate, it was breakfast because there was a bowl of mush in it of some sort, it wasn't oatmeal but I don't know what it was and I had a cup of coffee and some juice and right on, that was standing on the plate, and right on the plate was a little piece of butter and a dash of jelly. Well I don;t know about the bread. I can't remember that but there must have been there somewhere.

APPLEBOME: You were hungry? Did you eat the food?

THOMISSER: I think I did because the hot coffee especially was so good.

APPLEBOME: Had you been held on Ellis Island overnight?

THOMISSER: No, I got off the same day.

APPLEBOME: But they took you to a dormitory to rest for a little while?

THOMISSER: I think so, I really wonder about that myself because maybe they knew when my sister would pick me up and that was in the afternoon and they thought if I want to rest I could rest.

APPLEBOME: Did they give you a medical exam?

THOMISSER: No, because I had that in Germany, I had already the papers that I was examined, they didn't give me one there.

APPLEBOME: Did you see some of the questions or exams that other people were give?

THOMISSER: No, I didn't see anything of that. And then, while I was waiting for my sister, I walked around and that was quite a big room where I was walking and looked more like a park because there was benches and seats and so on but I know there was a roof over it. And I walked around there and on the bench were two colored girls sitting and those were

the first colored people I saw. They were very pretty, but just, I couldn't get over it that I passed by them, in front of them, I went back and forth, I was wondering, do they talk like humans, do they communicate some other way, I Just had no idea and they were so pretty dressed, nice colored, noisy clothes and I know each had a hat on, a cone-shaped hat, quite high up and there were all sorts of little decorations on it and I don't know, ribbons and things, all sorts of colors and I just loved that, I thought that was so pretty with their black faces and then maybe after that, sometime after I thought maybe I like that so much because I must have looked funny too in October where everyone was in, wearing dark clothes and I had that white summer dress on with the red embroidery and the purple sweater (she laughs).

APPLEBOME: Do you know what country those women were from?

THOMISSER: No, how could I, I mean they were just sitting there as if they were waiting for somebody to claim them. And then, in the afternoon, it was around 2:00 I think it was, I don't know how I knew it, that I should go to a certain office somewhere, where my sister was there to pick me up.

APPLEBOME: How long had been since you had seen your sister?

THOMISSER: She left before the War which was either in '12 or in '13.

APPLEBOME: Did you recognize her?

THOMISSER: Yes, I did and I still remember that she was dressed in black too and she had a black felt hat on with a green, narrow hat band around it.

APPLEBOME: You must have been glad to see her?

THOMISSER: Oh yes, we were very happy to met each other.

APPLEBOME: And then what did the two of you do?

THOMISSER: Well, she was working in a private family too and but she was about to get married.

APPLEBOME: But van you tell me, when she took you off Ellis Island, what your first impressions were? How did you get off the Island and where did you go?

THOMISSER: I don't know, I know we went to the subway and that was

just going down there and the train going, you know down underneath, oh that was just, how did they do it, how is that made and so on and in the subway, I know she gave me a few startled looks and which after I thought those looks were just embarrassing for her, the way I arrived with that white dress with the red flowers and the purple sweater (she laughs) and she took me to where she was working, to the same place, I stayed there for a whole week.

APPLEBOME: Where was that?

THOMISSER: Uh, 113th Street and Broadway.

APPLEBOME: Up by Columbia University.

THOMISSER: Yeah, I think it was 113--

APPLEBOME: And how did you like New York?

THOMISSER: Well, I mean everything was new, I like it but the thing was always waiting for the money, I mean no matter what happened, you couldn't overlook everything, you just wanted the money.

APPLEBOME: So how did you make money?

THOMISSER: But then, lets see, I got a place, yes, but then I made money, I had to take a job too that was in a private family and at 94th Street and Riverside Drive and I know that I had \$45 a month and I had a calendar my sister gave and everyday I crossed off one day, another day closer to payday and then that last day was, "Oh tomorrow morning I'm going to get \$45, and then that night was just a joy, I don't think I slept that night, being so happy for that money.

APPLEBOME: What would you do with the money?

THOMISSER: I kept \$5 and sent \$40 home (she laughs) I was hungry a lot of times, sitting in the Central Park on my day off, I wouldn't go out to eat, I wouldn't eat, I wouldn't spend that money, I'm going to hold onto it and from those \$5 I would write my brother and put a dollar in, write my mother and put a dollar in and just so that I even went through with almost nothing through the whole month, that kept on going for years already.

APPLEBOME: Did you get meals from the family that you worked for?

THOMISSER: Yes, because I stayed there overnight, it was a staying job.

APPLEBOME: Did your mother write back to you?

THOMISSER: Oh of course, yeah.

APPLEBOME: Was she able to fix the roof?

THOMISSER: Oh yeah, I left in October and right about in spring as soon as the snow was off, they got started tearing the house down and building it. I was looking at a picture the other day and I thought, it said there 1923 in front of the house, every house had the number big in the front right in the cement worked in when it was built so there it said 1923 but now I can't see the number anymore, it sort of faded away.

APPLEBOME: Your mother and brother didn't come over?

THOMISSER: Oh no, I kept them, my brother wanted to but somehow he took care of the farm and didn't get away, got

married and had a family, grew a family there.

APPLEBOME: Were you ever able to see them again?

THOMISSER: Yes, in 1936. And my mother gave me to understand, that was fourteen years after, she gave me to understand that she was disappointed in me, I'm not sending her that much money anymore as I did the first years (she laughs).

APPLEBOME: Was New York at all like you expected?

THOMISSER: Well, I had no idea what I should expect but the only disappointment I had in my first job, when I walked into that kitchen, the old ghastly looking gas stove, because in Europe we had (?) the stoves and this was what had a (?) with metal that you had to shine up every week, at least once a week and that, that was always the pride of the hausfrau that the stove had to shine, even the black we shined somehow, I don't remember how and here that gas stove there was such a grimy looking thing and home when I cleaned our stove I was always thinking I wonder what kind of stove they had in America and that they had some sort of a (?) or maybe golden or trimming and so on and so that was the biggest disappointment, I must say, but after I got very much used to it and was happy that there was nothing on, no trimming to clean because that would have taken too much time (she

laughs).

APPLEBOME: How were you able to learn English?

THOMISSER: Oh, I think I was already here about two or three years when I knew very little, but then I came to a family where there were children and I remember the little girl came home from her first grade and had little cards, there was house and cat and dog on it and I, when she said, "Now Heddy, you tell me if I spell this right," and she would say C-A-T," but I thought, there's no -C- here, you know, but in the house well there's an -O- instead of an -A- as it is in German. I couldn't make out but finally I grasped what it was and that was the beginning that I learned.

APPLEBOME: Did you stay in touch with your sister?

THOMISSER: Oh yes, you always stay in New York, I never was out of New York very much except in the summertime. I would go with the family to Long Island or upstate. One summer I was up in, oh, around the Adirondacks, how you spell, Adirondacks.

APPLEBOME: Yeah, did your people treat you differently because you were an immigrant?

THOMISSER: Well, it depends. As long as you're doing your work, they're good but if you want to slow down a little or get sick or something, well then you are nothing (she laughs) so I mean it was expected.

APPLEBOME: Did you miss your village?

THOMISSER: Oh yes, very much.

APPLEBOME: Did you ever think of going back?

THOMISSER: Why yes, I, but I was always so busy those first years, sending the money and then after I had doctor bills to pay and it took fourteen years before I did get back.

APPLEBOME: Were you satisfied with the amount of money you were making?

THOMISSER: Oh of course, I was over there, I always saw to it that

I really was one of the highest paid for the kind of work I did, sometimes a cook, sometimes an upstairs girl or nursemaid or something like that. I did work in a beauty parlor for a few years but then my mother would write me, she said, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, working in a beauty parlor, now you're cleaning the men, fingernails and toenails," I don't know where she got that (she laughs).

APPLEBOME: Let me see, what else? There were a few things you wanted to tell us, you said?

THOMISSER: Yeah, let me see--

APPLEBOME: There was something about your father I think.

THOMISSER: Yeah, this is about the father, uh, there was a fair in the next village and well there you could buy almost anything from socks to a horse and I went there two months with my mother and my father was around there too. He was, during the winter he was always buying and selling cows and pigs, he made his money that way in the wintertime. And then I was, he was

standing near the push-cart, you know what a push-cart is? And there were little sections, divisions in that push-cart and then each little section was a cluster of eye glasses in and then on top of each section was a sign from 50 to 55, from 55 to 60, up to 70. Now, if you were before 50, you couldn't buy eye glasses and if you were more than 70 you couldn't buy glasses anymore either. They bought the glasses after the age and my father was standing there and trying on the eye glasses from, he was forty-nine and he said, "I'd better see if I couldn't take the ones from 50 to 55, so you know, maybe they would fit em," but he tried them on, one after the other, there was a whole bunch of it, he said, "I don't know why I can't see so much better without the glasses," and he didn't buy any.

APPLEBOME: That's very funny. When you went back to Austria in 1936 did you think you were staying there?

THOMISSER: Oh no, no, no.

APPLEBOME: You like it more in the United States?

THOMISSER: Oh yeah, I mad sure I became a citizen before so even if a war would break out in the meantime, whatever, I don't need to stay there. And something here I meant to say.

APPLEBOME: Go ahead now.

THOMISSER: On the boat, when I started to eat after the seasickness, I couldn't eat the ice cream they served us some ice cream and it was the brick ice cream, vanilla with a red steak on the bottom, in the center, it looked so pretty and I couldn't eat that. I tasted it and I spit it out. I was wondering how people could eat such a thing.

APPLEBOME: You'd never had ice cream before?

THOMISSER: No, no.

APPLEBOME: Did you learn to like ice cream?

THOMISSER: Oh my goodness, I should say so and then once I had a grapefruit there and I know that woman who was home for a visit, she ate that and she said, "Try it Heddy, you'll get used to it," and so I tried it, that I spit out too, the grapefruit, I couldn't eat that. When I was six years of age, sister Anna and brother Joseph came home once, you know, they

worked, she worked in the factory and he was a bricklayer and they told my parents a story I thought was very funny. They shared their living for us, together, you know, anyway, they read in the newspaper that in a certain day, early in the morning, at a certain time, they could see the comet there, the comet, Halley's comet. They got up in the dark and walked and walked quite a distance to a certain hill, there they waited, for some reason the comet never appeared, it was getting light and some people didn't want to wait any longer and went home, the crowd was getting smaller, brother Joseph was anxious to stay a bit longer, the comet star still might appear. All of a sudden, somebody shouted, "There is the comet star," pointing towards my brother. Others pointed in that direction too. There was laughter and the girls were even screaming. Sister Anna looked toward my brother, she almost fainted, what she saw happened the night before, sister mended brother's working clothes. From one pair of pants she cut out the whole hindside and patched the other pants with it and in the morning, perhaps in the dark he grabbed the wrong pants (she laughs) how embarrassing that must have been for a seventeen year old, exposing his flannel underwear. And then when I was a little girl, I watched the stars at night, mother would point out the Milky Way and say, "That is the reflection of a street in Rome which is studded with diamonds for the Holy Father to walk on it." Isn't that something? I was home in 1936, I asked her if she still believes it, she said, "What else could make such a reflection up there?"

APPLEBOME: Thank you very much, that was a very nice interview. Heddy is going to read a little essay that she wrote and then a few poems that go along with it.

THOMISSER: In 1904 I was born in a pretty little town called Jabing, in Burgenland, Austria. The town was like a toy village with a long row of homes almost touching each other. Each house was surrounded by a fenced yard. The back of each yard, let out into a field of meadows. In front of each house was a little flower garden. Outside the fence was a road and right next to it, the other side of the road, was a fair sized creek, winding along with the road and Varshtis, the woman who rinse the laundry in the clear, flowing water and the other side of the creek, the bank of an enchanted forest ridge that over the hills and in the distance, the snow capped mountains. The artists and city folks who spent their summer vacations there, in Jabin, called it an ideal spot. I always had plenty to eat, which mostly came from the farm and (?) taught were pretty close to there until one day a family arrived from America for a visit. They had a boy and a girl. Oh, how we admired their beautiful clothes the girl wore. Her ponytail was adorned with a different colored ribbon almost every day. The boy was dressed in (?) which made him look like a prince in a fairy story particularly was he admired for his sailor suit. Nobody in town had such clothes. The family even has special clothes for bathing and swimming. They called them play clothes and swimsuits. We had to wear our

old clothes for that. They had almost, they had everyday cake and cookies in the house and rolls for breakfast. We has such food only on special holidays and then Sundays in between. Right then I thought, when I grow up, I will go to America too and make money as I can buy myself all those little, so I could buy myself all those little things. Finally on my eighteenth birthday, I arrived in New York City, eager to make money but a strange place that was for me. I couldn't speak English and had never seen such a big city before. Looking at all those show windows and food markets, my eyes got bigger and bigger, I wondered if this wasn't heaven. Then before long, I got work with a family in Manhattan, caring for all the children. Soon, I discovered that with the money I earned I could live comfortable, but what I needed and even have some money left. It didn't take me long to send packages back home with pretty clothes, ribbons and other nice things for the children among relatives and neighbors. I came across one ribbon that I like particularly well. It has three stripes running through it, red, white and blue. Later when I learned the meaning of that color combination, I not only liked it, I honored it and I always kept a piece of that ribbon in my possession for a reminder to thank God more often for being in America. In the following poem, I try to express my gratitude for my beloved, adopted country.

May every immigrant appreciate this land  
And rejoice at being adopted so nicely  
In its mantle of protection  
Although at times it seems the mantle may be growing to  
crowded  
To provide refuge for yet others  
Our country still tries hard to stretch that mantle out  
To include all of us foreigners  
New and future United States citizens

APPLEBOME: This is the end of side two of tape one of the  
interview with Miss Heddy Thomisser. This is the end of Interview Number  
155.