

NPS-40/LAESER

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
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ELLIS ISLAND ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Kay Laeser
Interviewer: Margo Nash
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NASH: Today is January 22, 1974. I am in the home of Mrs. Kay Laeser. Mrs. Laeser lives in a lovely two-family house in Jersey City. And she came to this country on April 1, 1954 at 4:00 o'clock in the morning.

LAESER: Two o'clock in the morning.

NASH: Two o'clock in the morning.

LAESER: In the afternoon.

NASH: Excuse me, the afternoon. Stepped foot in New York and said, "Please God, take care of me." And she was 56 years old when she came. Mrs. Laeser, where were you born?

LAESER: I am born in Koenigsberg, Ostpreussen. The Russians have it now and call it Kaliningrad or some thing like this. And when I was the last time in that town, I had to do there, I went to see my father's grave and my mother's grave, and I hear the bombs and the cannon from the Russians, so I say, "I better don't go to the cemetery," I took the next train and flew back to (?) or go back to the airplane and flew home.

NASH: And how big a family did you have?

LAESER: Yes, I had a daughter.

NASH: I mean when you grew up? Your family.

LAESER: We was four kids, two boys and two girls. My sister married a Jewish man and she was gone, immigrated to South America, to Sao Paulo with their son. And my brother stayed in, both brothers was in the wartime, in the war. And both was in Russian prison camps.

NASH: Did they get out?

LAESER: They got out, but they don't survive long, they are all gone. And I am the only one that lives.

NASH: Where did you grow up?

LAESER: I growed up to my, I would say, twenty-five years old, and then I say so, I go out of Koenigsberg. I am afraid the Russian get it one day and then I'm stay here alone with the Russians and I am afraid for the Russian, and I am afraid of the Russian today. And I hate every picture what you see in television when the people raise their fist and make a sign of communism, I hate communism.

I was really, actually, Kaiser-troy, but what we say as more national now, but when it doesn't go, I say no. I want to go to America. That was always in my mind.

NASH: After you were twenty-five where did you go?

LAESER: When I was twenty-five I was in Berlin. And my husband worked, I worked, we make good money, but my husband was from the wartime in prison camp, very bad down. So, I had 1926-- somebody came and visit a girlfriend a Jugendfreundin woman and say--

NASH: What does a Jugendfreundin mean?

LAESER: That means a girlfriend of the young time when she was young. And then she says, this Mr. Bender, he lived in Lakevolt, and she said, Mrs. Herlja, that was at that time my name, when you make it that mein Aulgustian, that was the first name of this woman, married me, I go with you, to a lawyer that speaks English and German and we make a contract and I take you over to America. If you go, she would go, but she didn't want. So it was settled in my mind and it never left me. Then in 192-- I don't know, I think 1933, I was divorced, my husband had another girl and I, maybe a half year or a year later, I was (?) engaged to a Jewish man, and now the Nazis started, oh.

NASH: It must have been hard to be engaged to a Jewish man at
that time.

LAESER: Yes.

NASH: What were the kinds of pressures that you felt?

LAESER: Pressure, the pressure was so strong and to me that I had
two and a half, no not two and a half, a half year
was going on crutches.

NASH: You mean from emotional strain?

LAESER: Yes, from emotional strain. He died, I don't know which
year. And in the meantime, I send my daughter that she don't has to go to
the Hitler regime and the Hitler (?).

NASH: What did people say to you when you were engaged to this
man, I mean what were the kinds of things that
happened to you that made you so ill?

LAESER: They want everything what I have, take from me.

NASH: Who told you that?

LAESER: The communists, the Nazi party. I say, "If you was to that engagement, bring me one, what was present that I was.

NASH: The engagement party.

LAESER: Yes.

NASH: You asked them if they went, how did they know you were engaged?

LAESER: Yes, yes. They said, nobody could say that. So then I send my daughter out of Germany and I had to go, I send her to Switzerland for two years in the English Internat [boarding school] in French Switzerland in every. And so she learned languages and what's necessary for life. Then when she came back Uschi that's the name for my daughter, I say my daughter, either I take now a job what brings money or I start to make my own business. I did, I make my own business. And now the Nazis started again, they put me out, I was in the only (?) I was in was the Arbeitsfront.

NASH: What does that mean?

LAESER: That means that our (?) is like you would say, you have to go in there that you have to handle people in your working place. I make very, very, good money because everyone was thinking I had big money from that Jewish man, and I swear wahr I sit here, by God, I gave him that one day I want him to be interview to the Nazi Party, I gave him for my money. thousand mark, it was not much, nut it was money that he had it, the money what they expect to see. Then I say, I make money. When my daughter came I say Uschi every morning you have to stand up four o'clock in the morning and we was (?) that means, I can't explain that in English. I make twenty-five, thirty thousand marks everyday income, selling. I make good money.

NASH: Tell me something about what it was like to live in Germany at that time.

LAESER: It was very, very hard. Then the bombs came.

NASH: Before the war, what was it like? I mean, do you remember the period when they were after the Jews? I mean, what do you remember of how it felt at that time?

LAESER: It was not right to go after the Jewish people. That was his stead, then it is not nice to pick on people. They have nothing to do. He want the whole world for

himself and that was not the right way what he should do. And then we started with the war. And everything what I had, I lost. Nothing left over.

NASH: Why did you lose it?

LAESER: When the bombs came you were happy if your life was saved.

NASH: In other words, the factory was destroyed?

LAESER: Yes, we all, we had not one, we had three or four factories. And then I married. No, then I make my driver's license on the 31st of August, 1937. And I say I buy a used car, but I don't make the new car back and I think quarter year later I bought a new car, from the factory, a new car. And from that man where I bought the car, I married. He was ten years younger than I am. And one day, you know how it is for every fashion show, you need models to show the fashion and he took one girl and one day he told me he wanted a divorce. He made it very, very bad with me. I took three times my life.

NASH: Did you try to commit suicide?

LAESER: Always I commit suicide. I had not any little bit in my

mind to live. And then I say, okay, and then I took, we was divorced.

NASH: How long had you been together with this man?

LAESER: Eleven years. And then I make, by myself, a factory in Stuttgart, open. And he was very, very bad, I can show it to you later on that can give it to you, if you interested to see it. He said in the paper, and the firm Kay Laeser, that man was Laeser, is not in (?) Laeser. And that put me down.

NASH: I don't understand, you'll have to say that in English.

LAESER: What?

NASH: You'll have to say it in English because I don't understand.

LAESER: Yes, this firm Kay Laeser is not in any connection with (?) Laeser. We had four or five factories. He took everything from me what he could, and broke me. And then one day, I said, if I would know how I can go to America, I don't want to stay here more. I am sick and tired of Germany, I go out.

NASH: Let's go back a little bit because you lived through so

many interesting, even though they were very awful times. I'd like to get a little more feeling of what it was like during the war. Were you there at the fall of Berlin?

LAESER: Of what?

NASH: The fall, the end, the last days?

LAESER: No, no, no. I was not in Berlin when Berlin fell. I was only there when Berlin was the middle. I lived on Alexanderplatz, that is a place like you would see here, say here, Times Square, on the same order. And from there I said, okay. I had a man what board for displaced persons, coats, and one day he came in my factory and say, "Katy, my mother comes from America, and she wants, you want always go to America, come over and speak to her." And so in the evening I was over there, and she showed me things from the United States.

NASH: What year was this?

LAESER: What?

NASH: What year?

LAESER: That was in 1953. And she showed me shoes, and they was

packed in American paper in German language. And there was an ad in the paper that somebody is looking for a housekeeper, I don't know about housekeeper at that time meant. So I say, "Okay." I answered that ad. I put a picture by, I put address and everything by and so, and I get answer from this man from North Haliden.

NASH: Where is that, in what state?

LAESER: In New Jersey, North Haliden, that's by Patterson. So he send me he would like that I come over. So I say, "Okay."

NASH: Who was going to pay for this trip?

LAESER: I paid, I came first class here. Then I only could take forty marks with me, that was the new minimum that you could take.

NASH: So at this time you had no more money really? You didn't have your factories anymore?

LAESER: No, so I had to give everything away and use it up, and make it up. So then on the first of April, 1954, at two o'clock in the afternoon, I set me foot down and say, "Dear God, please help me, be good with me." And I came to that man, he was there on the ship. And I brought very much paper to describe or to explain what happened to

me, to my life. And I came in the house, he had a daughter. He like me very much, Mr. Montviler, and he say, "You know Katy, I think the best way is if we were married." I say, "I don't know, you have a daughter." She was ill. And in the end, by accident, I was not there anymore, she shot him, he's dead.

NASH: His daughter shot her-- I want to go back just a moment to when you first got here. When you got off the ship what happened, was there someone there to meet you? Did you go to Ellis Island or any place?

LAESER: To what?

NASH: To Ellis Island?

LAESER: No, no, no. I wrote to Mr. Montviler, I come under the name G., then my name was at that time Glazer, and you meet me on G. And he was there. I brought twenty-three pieces--

NASH: Luggage?

LAESER: Yes.

NASH: Luggage.

LAESER: Luggage. And everything was alright. The first day was very bad. Mr. Montviler was going to work and she say (?) I couldn't speak English, so I don't know what to cook, what to do. I clean the house, I get twenty-five a dollar a week, it's a nice payment for a woman what had money to burn before, but I didn't care. So on the 6th of-- she sit in the kitchen and I had to scrub the floor on my knees. And then on the 6th of December, I had an ad in the paper, in Stadt Herold and look for another position. And there was a woman her name is Mrs. Hanamier, and she called me up and said, "If you want to do me very big favor, my daughter and my son, coming from Germany to live with me. I rented a home in Hoboken." And she spoke German, and I couldn't speak English, "If you would take my word for what I do, you would be the biggest favor what you can do to me." I say, "Okay, but how I come from North Haliden to Von Brooke, I have not any idea how to do it." "Okay, when my son is here from Germany, he picks you up." And then I say, "Papa Montviler. I leave you." And I left North Haliden.

NASH: You never married him?

LAESER: No. On the 6th of December, shortly before Christmas, I say that (?) have to do that, then I don't know what for me brings life here in New Jersey or in America where I need help, so I say that's my duty. Joy was over there, that Dr. Boro in Von Brooke and she spoke German. And she was very nice, and when I cooked and I make not twenty-five dollar, I make fifty dollar a week. So I say, Okay, that's very nice." I came on the 6th of December, and the first days, I think on the 15th of January or 20th of January, she say, "So Katy, we go on vacation." "You don't can leave me here alone in the whole house." "We know you don't take anything, you stay here." And then I said when she came back, "I want very badly my daughter come over here with her son." "Okay, I give you an affidavit of support, but you have to sign the paper that you stay one year in my home as my help." I say, Okay, I think about it, I let you know." So I came to my girlfriend Honey Mione, she say, "What, no I don't, I don't, say you want New Years Eve off." So I get New Years Eve off and she say, "Come, we go to friends," but I know, was a Mr. Miller, he had a restaurant across the street from Madison Square Garden, and he say, "When is your day off?" I say, "My day off is Thursday." "Okay, come in any Thursday I give you an affidavit for your son, grandson and for your daughter." So now I had it. So

when I come back, I say, "Mrs. Saborol, I want my money from the week before, she always let me hang on the money." "Why?" I say, "I need it, I bought something, I needed the money." It was a lie, but I wanted my money and then I say, when I had my money, I say, "So on the end of the week I leave you."

kind NASH: How did you originally come to the United States? What kind of a visa did you come on?

LAESER: A visa?

NASH: Did you come as a tourist?

LAESER: No, I came as a, I don't know what--

NASH: An immigrant?

LAESER: Immigrant, yes.

under NASH: And you were able to arrange that in Germany? You came under a quota?

LAESER: No, I came, I have papers, I have them here. I can show them to you. Everything was set for Mr. Montviler

that I could. So when I then come home with Mrs. Meyer she says it's (?) "Now you rent here in this home, this house, apartment." So I rented her apartment for thirty-four or thirty-five or thirty-two dollar a month, a cold water flat. I had a couple hundred dollar saved. Now I had an apartment, but I had not a job. So I say, "What I do now?" Somebody said, "You come not forwards, you go not ahead if you don't learn English." I give you an idea of what one woman said, "Go to children." There was an ad in Hoboken, "Need for my children a housekeeper." So I was over there, but I took my girlfriend with me and Mrs. Volfgildar, I called her Gilda later on, say, "How she can make herself understanding, when she don't can speak English." So I say, "It's very simple, you take me for one week and I work how I think it's right, and if you don't like it then you say, bye, bye." I was one and a half year there. To still my daughter came. Now, I was in the Salvation Army for secondhand furnitures for cheap money, everyone helped me. I bought a secondhand bedroom, I bought for this a new mattress that it don't have bad springs in it. Everything, this is a Salvation Army lamp that you see there, this is one. You buy nice things, you wouldn't believe it. I get everything. Gilda was so nice to me. I didn't get fifty dollar a week, I get thirty-five. I wa satisfied with that money. Then I say, I need

not carfare, I have Saturday and Sunday off. I was my own boss, I painted my whole apartment, but when somebody came in and say, "For that you wanted was a brush, this big, like two finger." Ah, he say, "Come, I make you the ceiling, give me five dollar I make you the ceiling>" He had a roller. Oh, my apartment was nice. Then I needed, that was cold water flat, I needed gas and a gas range. And a lady had one in the paper and so I, my girlfriend answered that, then she say, "Okay, if your house is so clean, my son was in Germany, and said "The streets are clean as when they clean everyday, if your home is clean I give you that gas and gas range, one is for eating and one is for cooking, I give it to you for a hundred dollar." She came in my house, she say, "Okay, you can have it for a hundred dollar, and my son brings it to you in the house." That was very, very, nice.

NASH: Why did she want to know if your house was clean?

LAESER: She want to know why her son always say, he was in the wartime in Germany, and said everything is in good places and good arranged, not upset everything. I don't know why, but it was that way. So then my daughter came.

NASH: Did she come as an immigrant? I send her the affidavit

and

I send her five hundred dollar, but I saved every penny--

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

-- I had to go to Salvation Army, and then she came. And then she was ten days here, I think Gilda had a little bit, she was afraid maybe now my daughter is here, my grandson is here, maybe it would not go clear with the food. So she say, "I have an aunt what want to take of the kids." And I learned from the big boy, from Eddie, to speak English. The first sentence what we had was, I say, "Eddie take (?)," "What?" he say. "This is the tish, this is the dish, I show you what a dish is. This is a table." Now, I learned from him. I made him learn me to speak English. And when my daughter came I say, "So, okay, now I am in a good condition, I speak, I think I speak English," I try and find a job as a saleslady in Bergenland Avenue, number 60 by (?). And when they closed up their job, I was eight days, that's the only time when I was without work. And then somebody told me you have to watch that you always have work, then to 65, you're 56 now, to 65 is not much years, that your Social Security is in the right way. Then they took me two weeks for jury

duty. My boss didn't pay, so I get three dollar a day and I make more money as a saleslady. So when the jury duty was over and Mrs. Risen closed that job, they were old, then I looked in other job as a saleslady and was working in oh, I don't know, no, I don't can tell the name now, maybe I get it a tiny little bit later. Bergenland Avenue near by. Oh, I was not long a saleslady, I was Assistant manager. And after that when they closed up, the boss died, I had another job in, oh, I forget names, the streets, as Assistant Manager, and she want me (?) as a Manager with a hundred dollar a week and two days off. And my daughter say, "No, nothing." In the meantime we had another complaint, my grandson couldn't speak English, everything what was in Hoboken, miserable, that left it, my grandson. So my daughter say, "Mama, what am I doing. I have to go out of here." So my girlfriend Hanna Mier, she lives in Florida, her name is now Motwersil, she is married in the meantime, she say, "I know from Isen brothers they want taken care of her mother, maybe you go over and see," and my daughter took that job, only to go out of Hoboken. And she was in the Park Avenue, I think 7612 Park Avenue and I could go work, I slept there, I ate everything and I had my money. I saved whatever I could. And my grandson learned everything. And then, my grandson is now, he writes me a German letter, he makes so much

mistakes, you wouldn't believe it. My grandson, he is so ambitious, he was one and a half year in Korea, before he was in Alaska, he was by the soldiers. He was a Sergeant or a (?) or what you call it. Now, he made his Warrant Officer in three times written, yes. And now they have in a bad condition in Hawaii, he has to go to Hawaii, he is in Hawaii. Officer's casino is not in the right condition, he is the Manager. He has to do that, then he has the ambition to do it, that is him. When he came, when in this country he came, my daughter, when we lived in Hoboken, my daughter say, "(?) go down on the corner and say, when you come out, and say, "I want a TV Guide," five minutes later he came back and say, "I am afraid to go in," in German, my daughter say, "You are a boy, you have to do it, what I say and not how you want it. You have to learn it." And he learned it, really. And then I want to explain, but the first Christmas, what I had here in this country was, on Christmas Eve I was sitting on a bench on a street waiting for a bus, the cars stopped and say, "(?)," what should mean, you want in? That I know, no, no, no, no, that I know to say, no, no. And every Christmas that's a very funny remember to me. The first Christmas, but I never have one minute said, I am sorry I came over. I am happy here. I say my grave is here in United States, I love it here. It's a wonderful country,

really I mean it. And I want to say, nobody should be afraid to come in this country. This country has every opportunity, so soon you willing to do, you can do it. I could do it in my age and I do it and will do so soon I can. What you see, the surrounding is not bad, no. I'm right or wrong?

NASH: You're right.

LAESER: Then it is a wonderful country. I love it here.

NASH: Well, I am glad you're so happy.

LAESER: What?

NASH: I'm glad that you're content?

LAESER: Oh, yes. I'm very, very happy, but you wouldn't believe it. You can't guess how much Social Security I get, one hundred and seventy dollars and 30 cents. And I only was over ten years working, that's big money because I mad big money, and I was always, I want work, I don't want to sit around and do nothing. When I was the first time here in North Haliden by Patterson, in the left side I had in English written, from here, for I go to New York,

in English written. When on the right side I had in, where I go from here to patterson. I was going to every place, I never was afraid to see the places. If everyone that comes here and want not work, they should go back. This is the place for work and you make money. And they should say, what you call it here? What you call that when they get money for do nothing?

NASH: Unemployment insurance?

LAESER: No.

NASH: Welfare?

LAESER: Welfare. That they should put on the side for nobody. Welfare is not necessary, they should put the people on the streets to clean the streets, and see how dirty they are. For that they can get welfare money. So old I am, after two heart attacks, and you don't have to forget, I had four cancer operations in Germany. I have twelve operations behind me, everything and I am not afraid. What can I do, I do, and if I don't can make it, I leave it for a day later and try today again.

NASH: Well, thank you very much Mrs. Laeser.

LAESER: I'm happy here, really happy.

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