

Text Transcript

EI-393 GUSTAV REHBERGER

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Interviewer: Janet Levine

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Austria, 1923 Age 13 Passage On "The Munchen"

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the *National Park Service*, and I'm here today, it's October 2, 1993. I'll be interviewing Gustav Rehberger, who came from Austria in 1923, when he was thirteen years old. I just want to say welcome. I'm very happy to have this chance to talk with you, and I'm looking forward to your story. Uh, let's start at the beginning. Will you say for the tape your birth date?

REHBERGER: Say that again. What?

LEVINE: Would you say your birth date?

REHBERGER: Oh, birth date. October 20, 1910.

LEVINE: And where were you born?

REHBERGER: A little town, a farming town called Riedlingdorf, Austria.

LEVINE: Could you spell the name of the town?

REHBERGER: Riedlingdorf. R-I-E-D-L-I-N-G-D-O-R-F. Riedlingdorf.

LEVINE: Would you, about how small a town was that?

REHBERGER: Fifteen hundred people, yes.

LEVINE: And was your father a farmer?

REHBERGER: Yes. Yes, he was a farmer, but then there's more to it.

LEVINE: Okay, go ahead.

REHBERGER: Want me to tell you now?

LEVINE: Yes.

REHBERGER: All right. During World War One, my parents came here before World War One. It was customary in those day to come to America, because this was the land of opportunity. So they came to Chicago, and they left the kids with my grandparents in Austria, so we were brought up with my grandparents.

LEVINE: How old were you when your parents left for America?

REHBERGER: Three.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REHBERGER: All right? Now, I remember my father holding me in his arm, and I heard the word *krieg*, which means war. That's the only thing I remember at that time. And then we didn't see him for seven-and-a-half years later. They came back in 1920, after the war, and they were going to start farming again, but my father, he didn't like the looks of it over there, and also I had so much artistic talent that he thought there were opportunities in America. So he came to America in 1923.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, now, the grandparents that you stayed with when your parents went to America.

REHBERGER: Yes.

LEVINE: Were they your mother or your father's parents?

REHBERGER: Uh, my mother's parents.

LEVINE: And what were their names?

REHBERGER: Uh, the last name, Piff, P-I-F-F.

LEVINE: That was your mother's maiden name, Piff?

REHBERGER: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, um, do you remember experiences with your grandparents? Were there things that you, activities that you did with them?

REHBERGER: The thing I remember most, one of the things I remember most is that since we were war babies, you know, we wore wooden shoes split in half, and then there was a little canvas loop over it, and then we didn't have any socks. We wrapped rags over our feet in the wintertime so we wouldn't freeze. I remember that, yes.

LEVINE: Did, were you living, then, in the same little town that you were born in?

REHBERGER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Your grandparents were there?

REHBERGER: Where I was born, that's only about a ten-minute walk from my grandparents' house.

LEVINE: I see. So was your grandfather a farmer?

REHBERGER: Yes.

LEVINE: What kind of things was he farming?

REHBERGER: Well, see, the thing is this. Although it was a town of fifteen hundred people, they had various pieces of land, which they called *Ackers* [fields], and they were in different parts of the town, so you came to this part for corn, somewhere else for potatoes, somewhere else for apples, you know, things like that. So it was quite interesting.

LEVINE: Yeah. Now was your grandfather, I mean, did he own those *Ackers* in different parts of town?

REHBERGER: Oh, yes. They owned that, yes.

LEVINE: And how about our, like, livestock?

REHBERGER: Oh, we had livestock, yes. Cows, pigs and, you know, all the animals that you usually had, except horses. Now, the cows were the beasts of burden. Now, what was interesting about this, about my grandfather's, he had a lot of foresight. He built a very deep cellar, because there was no refrigeration at the time. And people, they liked the idea, so they used to rent space in his coal cellar, so it was quite interesting. But then, you want me to keep going?

LEVINE: Well, let me ask you about your, um, the things that your grandparents grew, um, well, did your grandmother work on the farm, too?

REHBERGER: Oh, everybody.

LEVINE: Everybody did.

REHBERGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: The things that they grew, were they for home use, and also . . .

REHBERGER: For home use, and also, uh, well, like here they have farmer's markets. Well, they had that over there. For instance, the butter, they would sell, and other things they would sell. So we never had butter. That was all for sale for the farmer's market. Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. Well, can you remember a farmer's market?

REHBERGER: No.

LEVINE: No, uh-huh, uh-huh. Let's see. So, um, your mother grew up about ten minutes or miles from where you were born.

REHBERGER: From where I was born, yes.

LEVINE: And how about your father's family? Were they in that general area as well?

REHBERGER: They were, my father was born, oh, you see, at that time it was always not by the distance but by how long it takes to walk. So he was born, I would say, a two-hour walk away from where we eventually lived, yeah.

LEVINE: And, um, did you know your father's parents?

REHBERGER: No.

LEVINE: No. And what was your father's name?

REHBERGER: Well, this is the, according to my nephew, this is the story about my father. He was adopted, which was customary in those days, you know, like if you can't afford to bring up a child, you know, an aunt, like I think an aunt adopted him, and his, I think her name was Hotwagner.

LEVINE: H-O-L-T?

REHBERGER: H-O-T, wagner. And then, uh, no, I think he was born a Hotwagner, but then a Rehberger, the Rehberger aunt adopted him, and that's how the name *Rehberger* came about.

LEVINE: I see. And what was his first name?

REHBERGER: Yosef.

LEVINE: Yosef. And, um, did he, did you have aunts and uncles that were your father's brothers and sisters, or no?

REHBERGER: Oh, yes. I had, my brother had a, my father had a brother there. He didn't live in the same town. He lived some distance away. Yeah.

LEVINE: Did you have much chance to see him?

REHBERGER: No, no.

LEVINE: And how about your mother's family? Did she have brothers and sisters?

REHBERGER: My, my . . .

LEVINE: Your mother?

REHBERGER: Oh, yes. My mother had a sister. We were very close with her, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What was your mother's name, her first name?

REHBERGER: Elizabeth.

LEVINE: Elizabeth. And her sister, your aunt?

REHBERGER: Uh, Pauline. We called her Linney, you know, for slang.

LEVINE: And when you were being raised by your grandparents, was Pauline, or Linney, around at that time?

REHBERGER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And were you the oldest child, or . . .

REHBERGER: The youngest. I was the baby.

LEVINE: You were the baby. And what were your brother and sisters' names?

REHBERGER: My brother's name is, uh, Yohann, and my sister's name was Theresa, but she, she died about four years ago.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And your brother?

REHBERGER: My brother's alive, yes, in Chicago.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. So, and did, did both your brother and sister go to your grandparents also?

REHBERGER: Oh, yes. We were all brought up there.

LEVINE: Okay. Uh, did you go to school?

REHBERGER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: What do you remember about school there?

REHBERGER: Well, oh, I was . . .

LEVINE: Or how did it compare with school after you got here? Did you go to school here, too?

REHBERGER: Yes, I went to school here.

LEVINE: So maybe the comparison.

REHBERGER: Well, I was one of those whiz kids, you know. In fact, when they had, I don't know what it's called in the U.S. here, but they had a, uh, examination, you know, the festivities after school, after the school term. And they would ask, they, you'll have to answer questions. And I remember they, they asked me twenty-one questions, and I answered all of them.

LEVINE: That was here.

REHBERGER: No, that was over here.

LEVINE: There. Uh-huh.

REHBERGER: And I was a very smart kid at the time. And I remember one of my aunts gave me a dollar, I mean, a *kroner*, which was like a dollar over here, for being so smart. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Oh. Huh. Well, what kind of, how was the school over there? Was it strict? Was it a one-room school? What was the school like?

REHBERGER: Well, it was one room, and I guess the following year, as you advanced in grades, then there's another room there. But it was great. There was nothing wrong there, yeah.

LEVINE: Was it boys and girls together?

REHBERGER: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REHBERGER: Yes.

LEVINE: And, um, so you, so you were, uh, you were considered a smart . . .

REHBERGER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Boy, in grade school.

REHBERGER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And did you show artistic talent as early as that?

REHBERGER: Immediately. They tell me that I used up all the paper. When I was two years old I drew, I already drew then. In fact, uh, when my brother and sister, when they went to school, they used to bring my work to school. And then, then, of course, they oohed and aahed over it. And then when I went to, when I went to school two years later, they already said, "*Hier kommt*

der Meister," you know, 'here comes the master,' you know, so I was already famous when I was, when I was in fifth, first grade, five years old.

LEVINE: What did you start by drawing? What were your subjects?

REHBERGER: Anything, yeah.

LEVINE: Did you come by that naturally? I mean, was there anyone else in your family that . . .

REHBERGER: Yes. I was born with it. My father had a little talent. He wanted to be an architect in Vienna, but then, I guess, the small town life appealed to him more. In fact, that's how he met my mother. Otherwise he would have probably stayed in Vienna.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

REHBERGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Um, let's see. Is there anything else about, can you remember what you did for fun? I mean, were there games? Were there enjoyable get-togethers when you were still in Austria? What do you remember as entertainment, or . . .

REHBERGER: Well, I remember I had athletic ability, like turning somersaults, leaping over things, you know. Well, I continued that over here when we came over here. So I became quite an acrobat, and I used to leap over automobiles head first. I was a real daredevil at the time. And I always wanted to be a Hollywood stunt man. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Did you, did you know anything about America before you came? What did you know before you actually got here, about it?

REHBERGER: Well, all I knew about America was that my parents were over here, and, of course, we, since I was three when they left, so we looked upon them as, as gods and goddesses, you know. And when they finally arrived in 1920, seven-and-a-half years later, the whole town turned out to welcome them. And I remember when they got off the train they, well, they looked very elegant, you know, much more so than the farmers, see?

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Were there people from your town going to America and coming back?

REHBERGER: Yes, yes. In fact, at the time, it was customary, since America was the land of opportunity and Chicago seemed to be the most looked upon as being the city of opportunity. A lot of times, a lot of times, I don't know how many, but two people would get married, and the next day he would leave for America and she would carry on with the farm. He came over here for a few years to make money and then go back. That was the custom.

LEVINE: I see. So people actually did go back and then resumed farming there.

REHBERGER: Oh, yes, they did, yes.

LEVINE: After they made some money here.

REHBERGER: Well, that's what my parents wanted to do, but it didn't work out.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what would people generally do when they came to America for work, do you know? I guess they went to Chicago, mainly, from where you were.

REHBERGER: Uh, Chicago, well, they were, it would be, I guess most of them were in the building line, you know, help built houses and stuff like that, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. How about religious life? Did you have a religious life when you were in Austria?

REHBERGER: Oh, yes. We went to church every Sunday, yes. Which was not in my town, it was in a neighboring town, a half-hour walk away from there.

LEVINE: Everybody walked, I take it.

REHBERGER: Everybody walked, yeah.

LEVINE: And what was the church? What was the, what kind of church?

REHBERGER: You mean the denomination?

LEVINE: Yeah.

REHBERGER: Evangelical Lutheran.

LEVINE: And so it was a matter of going to church on Sunday.

REHBERGER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And was there any other, uh, religious observance, uh, besides Sunday church, that you remember? Any kind of, like, confirmation or any kind of festivities, or . . .

REHBERGER: Well, I guess there was confirmation when you're old enough to be confirmed.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Were you confirmed before you left Austria? Because you left at, what, thirteen? I don't know when confirmation would be. It's around then, isn't it?

REHBERGER: I don't either. I don't remember that. I guess so.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So were your, were your grandparents very religious?

REHBERGER: Oh, uh, yes. Oh, yes. I would, can I bring up one more thing?

LEVINE: Sure, uh-huh.

REHBERGER: When my parents came back from America to Austria, and I showed all this special talent, you know, then my father sent me to *Bürgerschule*, which is called, like a prep school, you know, in that next town.

LEVINE: How old were you then?

REHBERGER: Uh, about two years before we came to America.

LEVINE: Oh, so you were eleven.

REHBERGER: I must have been eleven then.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, this *Bürgerschule*, was this for boys?

REHBERGER: *Bürgerschule*, no both.

LEVINE: Both.

REHBERGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And what was different about that than the regular school you'd been in?

REHBERGER: Well, the regular, it's like a prep school. It's more elevated, you know. It's more for special students, I guess. Yeah.

LEVINE: And did you, how did you like it?

REHBERGER: Oh, I was a big hero there in my artwork, you know. Oh, yes. Uh-huh.

LEVINE: So you must have always been sort of confident about your abilities in art from a very early age.

REHBERGER: Oh, yeah. Well, I was, in art I was always singled out. Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Is there anything else about life in Austria that . . .

REHBERGER: Yes.

LEVINE: . . . you can think of.

REHBERGER: We had to do chores. Like, for instance, on a Sunday we'd be out in the forest somewhere, then we had to come home to do the chores. I hated it.

LEVINE: What were your chores?

REHBERGER: Well, we had to feed the cows, the pigs and all that sort of thing, you know. So I never liked that. So when my father said we're coming to America, we jumped for joy. So, oh, uh, one more important, this might be interesting. When they killed the pigs, you know, for, uh, pork, right? Well, the men, the men would chase the pig, you know, up the, uh, the manure heap, you know. That's usually where they caught them. And the woman would run with a big pan, the men would have a knife, you know, and the woman would have a big pan with a, kind of a big spoon. And then when they caught the thing, one of the men would stick the knife into the, uh, what do you call this vein?

LEVINE: The jugular?

REHBERGER: The jugular vein, and the blood would squirt out into the pan. And she immediately went into the kitchen and made blood pudding out of it, and we ate that right away. So . . . (he laughs) That was, I mean, a screaming affair, you know. Oh, God. It was a screaming affair, yeah.

LEVINE: Was the blood pudding considered a real special dish?

REHBERGER: Oh, yeah. It was very good. Well, at least in those days. But I can't look a pig in the eye now. And rabbits, also. We would take a rabbit by the ears and, and give it a karate chop, and it would be dead. Then we'd cook the rabbit and have rabbit stew. I can't look a rabbit in the eye.

LEVINE: Yeah.

REHBERGER: No.

LEVINE: What do you remember about other dishes that either your grandmother or your aunt or anybody fixed?

REHBERGER: Well, since we were wartime babies, uh, we only had meat once a week on a Wednesday, for one meal. Otherwise it was potatoes and natural crops, you know.

LEVINE: Vegetables.

REHBERGER: Which was very healthy, of course.

LEVINE: Yeah. So what, so the one day a week would be, that would be, like a special . . .

REHBERGER: Yeah, that was, that's the treat for the week.

LEVINE: Occasion, uh-huh.

REHBERGER: Wednesday, yeah.

LEVINE: And you'd have things like pig and rabbit and . . .

REHBERGER: Oh, yeah, yeah. You know, yeah, that's it. And then they would have, uh, smoked meat. See, they had a stove where the cooking was done, like a, uh, a tile stove. And the meat would be hung over it so the smoking, uh, vapors, they would go into that meat, and that's when we had smoked meats, which was out of this world.

LEVINE: What was used in the stove for fuel?

REHBERGER: Fuel?

LEVINE: Was it wood, or was it, uh, something else, that the stove burned?

REHBERGER: Oh, we had a stove, let's see. I guess it was wood, yeah.

LEVINE: Were the tiles colored tiles, painted, ceramic, like?

REHBERGER: Yeah. It had a stove with those tiles, very interesting. You know, you must have seen those. They were universal, those stoves. Oh, and one thing that's interesting about baking bread. See, everybody baked their own bread, and below the cooking stove there was a vast opening. Oh, my gosh, about six feet square, or something like that. And they would, uh, shovel coal in there. You know, they would burn wood until it's coal, and that would heat the stove, and then they would rake it out and they would put their loaves of bread in there, and the heat would bake it. So that was interesting. And the bread, of course, was out of this world, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Was it white bread, or was it some other . . .

REHBERGER: Uh, rye.

LEVINE: Rye bread. Wow.

REHBERGER: I never heard of white bread until we came to America. Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. So when your father and mother came back in 1920.

REHBERGER: Yes.

LEVINE: Then did you, did they move in with your grandparents, or did you move in with them, or?

REHBERGER: We, we, they moved into the house that we owned.

LEVINE: I see.

REHBERGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then you were, let's see, you were there for a while, and then when you went away to the prep school, were you living at home, or you were living in the school?

REHBERGER: No. I was living at home. It was only a half-hour walk from where I lived, yes.

LEVINE: I see. So, uh, were your mother and father there then until 1923 when you all left together?

REHBERGER: Yes. Two-and-a-half years.

LEVINE: And what, why was the decision made to leave in 1923?

REHBERGER: Well, it looked like another war, and my father, he didn't see the opportunity any more in farming, you know. That was past history. And then also he, everyone was so taken with my art ability that that was part of the reason, because the opportunity was over here, so we packed up and came over here.

LEVINE: What had your father been doing over here when he was over here the first time?

REHBERGER: I, as far as I know he was in the building line. I don't know exactly what he did.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And was he in Chicago?

REHBERGER: Chicago, yes.

LEVINE: Okay. So, uh, did, your mother and father, I guess, saved up their money and . . .

REHBERGER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And got the tickets, and . . .

REHBERGER: Yes, they came back with the American dollars, which in those days were very beautiful, those gold, one side was yellowish gold, and then it was redeemable instantly for cash.

LEVINE: Huh.

REHBERGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: You mean it wasn't actually a dollar bill. You're not talking about . . .

REHBERGER: Oh, yes, it was a dollar bill.

LEVINE: It was a dollar bill.

REHBERGER: But, in fact, the money was so strong you couldn't tear it in those days.

LEVINE: Huh. I didn't realize it was a different, a gold color.

REHBERGER: It was, oh, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, um, so do you remember getting ready to leave? Do you remember packing up?

REHBERGER: Oh, yes. We had an auction, sold all the farm equipment and everything, yeah.

LEVINE: And do you remember anything that either you or your mother or father packed to take here with you? Anything that they brought to America that they wanted to have here?

REHBERGER: I don't think much. I don't remember much. But then I have the interesting story to tell, when you're ready for that.

LEVINE: I'm ready.

REHBERGER: You're ready? Okay. As you know, I don't know as you know, but in those days the dollar was, you know, the almighty dollar was worth a lot of money, not like today, you know. So, uh, the exchange, I don't know exactly what happened there, but that money was indestructible. You know, you could get it wet and it wouldn't matter, you know. Now, if it's wet now, you can tear it in half, just like that. Anyway, so my mother sewed the, uh, the bills, well, it must have been more than single dollars. Maybe they were tens or twenties or fifties or something. She sewed them into my pants quilt-style, so I was the expensive baby with those dollar bills, you know. And I remember, you know, quilt-style, I guess so nobody would notice it. All right. Now comes the story. Want me to tell that story?

LEVINE: Yeah. When she sewed that into your clothing, was that when you were coming to America?

REHBERGER: Oh, yes. So I wore that pants all the time. All right. Now comes the story. Are you ready for this?

LEVINE: I hope so.

REHBERGER: The *Munchen*, the *Munich*, the ship, it was a 36-ton ship. There's a storm at sea in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. And the bow, you know, as it was going, the bow went down, and up, you know, it went in this direction. There are two directions of a ship. One is when it goes side to side, and the other is when it goes up and down. Well, this went up and down. There was a terrific storm. And they had a rope, they had it roped off that no one, about fifty feet from the bow, that no one was to go past that rope. So I went past that rope, and I went up to the bow, and I remember there were a couple of little openings, and I wrapped my arms around that opening there, and I was watching the storm. I was getting wet, you know. Well, I was very adventurous.

LEVINE: It was exciting.

REHBERGER: Yeah, it was exciting. I didn't know I was doing anything wrong. And I guess about an hour, forty-five minutes or an hour later, I heard voices, and my father and the stewards and other people, they were all looking for me, and then they found me, and my father was so

joyous to see me, and I still don't know whether it was the money that made him joyous or me. (they laugh) But it is something, I mean, the daredevil spirit I had, even then, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. How else would you describe yourself, as a thirteen-year-old boy coming to this country? I mean, I guess you were . . .

REHBERGER: Well, I was eager to come here. My brother and I, we were, we were happy to come here, because this was the land of opportunity, and we didn't like the chores, you know, that. And my sister, she didn't want to come because she was just beginning to, uh, get into the wave of, you know, boys and that wonderful life, you know, in a small town where they have dances and that sort of thing. So, but we were happy, uh.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. Well, I think maybe this is a good place to pause while we turn over the tape, and then we'll resume.

REHBERGER: Okay.

END OF SIDE ONE
BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming now. Uh, is there anything else that you would mention about the voyage on the *Munchen*?

REHBERGER: Yes. I got seasick. (he laughs)

LEVINE: After being such a daredevil up in the bow?

REHBERGER: Well, I got seasick. And I remember they gave me oranges, and for some reason I blamed the oranges, but that wasn't it. So I couldn't look an orange in the eye for ten years after that.

LEVINE: Now, were you actually drawing or sketching or anything on the trip over?

REHBERGER: No, I was too sick.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And what do you remember about accommodations aboard the ship?

REHBERGER: Well, we came over second class. They were fine. You know, you have that porthole.

LEVINE: So you were in a cabin?

REHBERGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: With your family.

REHBERGER: Oh, yes. Second class. Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, uh, let's see. Um, did you have examinations before you got aboard the ship?

REHBERGER: I don't remember that.

LEVINE: No. Do you remember the ship coming into the New York harbor?

REHBERGER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: What do you remember about that?

REHBERGER: Well, first of all, uh, it was supposed to land earlier, a few days earlier, I think three days earlier. But because of some international law, whatever it was, it was delayed three days, so the ship would do maneuvers on the ocean to waste time. I remember they would throw like a buoy type of a thing in the ocean, and the ship would circle around two or three or four or five miles, and they would pick it up again. That was to waste time because, so they wouldn't arrive too early, and that's how we happened to get here on the second. Otherwise it would have been two or three days earlier.

LEVINE: Do you know why they needed to hold up . . .

REHBERGER: I don't know. There was some kind of a zoning law, or some kind of an international law where you couldn't arrive before then. I don't know the details of that, yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. So then the ship came into the New York harbor.

REHBERGER: Oh, yes. And there was the Statue of Liberty. You know, of course, we jumped for joy.

LEVINE: Uh, do you remember, uh, the event? I mean, do you remember, what did the people do aboard ship?

REHBERGER: Oh, I don't know. I guess I was too concerned with seeing the, uh, the enlightenment of America, you know. Because to me America was the, well, the land of opportunity so to speak, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So did your, were you and your family, then, on deck?

REHBERGER: Yes, oh, yes, yes.

LEVINE: When you came into the harbor. And then Ellis Island. What do you recall of that?

REHBERGER: Ellis Island, I remember we, uh, we came down the plank or whatever it was, and then when we landed in Ellis Island I remember this big, this big expanse of room. Well, you wouldn't exactly call it a room. You know, the interior of, of the, of where they examined people.

And there was a big sign in the distance, and I said to my father, I said, “*Was heißt* No Smoking?” I remember the way I pronounced it with a K, no smo-king. And then he said “*nicht rauchen*”, you know, in German that means ‘no smoking.’ I remember that very clearly.

LEVINE: And, uh, do you remember the examinations?

REHBERGER: Not too much. Yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember having food, or a meal here?

REHBERGER: Well, we ate. After we got through with Ellis Island, the situation, we ate somewhere. I remember that. Because, uh, see, we arrived on the second. On the third we were on the train to Chicago. And you want me to go on from there?

LEVINE: Well, um, is there anything else about Ellis Island that you remember at all?

REHBERGER: Well, there were thousands of people, and they, everybody was being examined, I don't know to what extent.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything that struck you as different?

REHBERGER: I think they looked at the baggage, yeah.

LEVINE: And, uh, what about your clothing with the money in it? Was that any kind of . . .

REHBERGER: No, we got by with that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So when you left Ellis Island, uh, did somebody meet you or anything, or did your father, I guess your father showed that he had enough money to, uh . . .

REHBERGER: No, nobody met us. Uh, well, in Chicago there were, what do you call those people? Sponsors. You know, we stayed with them, but I'll go on with that when you're ready.

LEVINE: Well, yeah. Tell me about, then, the trip from New York to Chicago.

REHBERGER: Well, we, we spent all day on the train sitting up, you know, no sleepers or anything. Just, it seats two people in whatever, coach style, you know. We were all day long there, and then, uh, we arrived in Chicago at night when, and the Wrigley building was all lit up, and it looked like a wedding cake, you know, it was so beautiful, you know. So that was my introduction to Chicago. So I was very elated, of course. And then, well, all right, so we, and then we slept, we arrived at, uh, around ten o'clock at night on the third, and the next morning was the Fourth of July. Of course, we didn't know anything about the Fourth of July. And when we woke up in the morning, there were the fireworks going off. So we had a, so we had a real welcome. So that was my first introduction to the “boom” of this country, you know.

LEVINE: Were you, um, living with your sponsors at first, or . . .

REHBERGER: Only, I think only one night or two, because then we immediately found an apartment, or they found it for us. I'm not sure which. But can I tell you more about the Fourth of July?

LEVINE: Oh, yeah.

REHBERGER: A cousin of mine, a distant cousin, you know, for the sponsors, he was my age. So he took me to a movie. I never had seen a movie before. And when we walked in, there was, it was a Western, there was a bar, and there were two guys fighting at the bar, beating each other up, and I never got over it. I'm still a Western fan. I never got over that, it was so exciting.

LEVINE: Now, did you enroll in school right away, that September?

REHBERGER: Yes. Yeah, I did, yeah. I went to a, um, parochial school, which was right, not too far from where we lived.

LEVINE: You mean, a Catholic school?

REHBERGER: No, it was . . .

LEVINE: A Lutheran?

REHBERGER: A Lutheran church. A Lutheran school, yeah. Evangelical Lutheran school, yeah.

LEVINE: And how was that different from the school you had attended, the schools you had attended in Austria?

REHBERGER: I guess more or less the same. And, of course, I immediately became, uh, a hero there because of my art ability, you know. I would draw all sorts of pictures. I drew a picture of Washington and Lincoln and things like that. Yeah. I still have those drawings.

LEVINE: Wow. And how, what about, what would, how did the other children react to, to you?

REHBERGER: Well, at first they didn't like the fact that the teacher used to single me out to show my work. But then later on, uh, if there was to be an examination, and they weren't ready for it, they said, "Will you bring in some of your work so we can delay this thing for another day?" So then I became popular. They used me as a crutch.

LEVINE: I see. Now, how, had you studied any English? Could you speak any English when you first came?

REHBERGER: No, no.

LEVINE: What was that like, being in school and not knowing the language.

REHBERGER: I caught on very fast. In fact, one year later I won the spelling contest.

LEVINE: Well. So did you continue to speak, uh, German at home?

REHBERGER: No. We tried not to. We tried to speak English. So for some reason or other the transition from, we spoke German in Austria, that seemed to be no problem.

LEVINE: Can you remember any, um, values or attitudes that your parents expressed to you when you were little, when you had first come to this country? In other words, what they wanted, or expected, of you, being American?

REHBERGER: I remember my father, uh, they would go to a movie, but they wouldn't let me go. They said, "You stay home and draw." So I had to stay home and draw, except Saturdays I would see the serials, you know, like Tom Mix and Buck Jones and things like that, huh.

LEVINE: Now, wait. Your drawings were getting recognition at school and at home. Did . . .

REHBERGER: Immediately, yeah.

LEVINE: Did you ever start to show them, you know, as a group, in a group of your work anywhere? When did you start doing that?

REHBERGER: Well, that was later. However, uh, when I was one year in this country I, uh, I had done, it's kind of hard to explain. I did a painting on ice. There's a big box about, uh, oh, thirty by forty inches, something like that, and then we packed snow in there, and then it became ice, and I did an oil painting on that. And then this, uh, director of the playground thought this would be worthy for someone to see. So he called up the newspapers and they came, and then, uh, in fact, I have pictures here to show you later on. So, uh, so I had newspaper articles, and then I immediately got a scholarships to the *Art Institute of Chicago* when I was fourteen, one year in this country. So I was always hailed as outstanding in that direction.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. When you say an oil painting, you mean a canvas was stretched over the ice?

REHBERGER: No, the ice itself.

LEVINE: Just on the ice.

REHBERGER: But the, but after the ice melted, you could take the skin, the oil painting, and hold it up. Then it would tear eventually, so it would last. Oh, I was also on *Pathé News* with the thing.

LEVINE: Wow. So what was your feeling about being touted as an artist and your parents wanting you to stay home and draw? I mean, did you feel like this is what you wanted, this is . . .

REHBERGER: Oh, of course. Well, that's, I loved it, you know. Of course, there were a certain few movies I would like to have seen, you know, but eventually I did see them. But, uh, but it was all made up by the serials on Saturday.

LEVINE: Um, so, when you, uh, let's see, the *Art Institute*, then. You would have been one of the younger students there.

REHBERGER: I was fourteen, yeah.

LEVINE: Because what age were most of the students? Weren't they older?

REHBERGER: Oh, I think all ages. I don't know exactly. What, I was young, obviously young to get a scholarship, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was that like? What was new to you going then to that . . .

REHBERGER: Well, I went there, see, also, since eventually I had to go to work, you know, I, um, I stayed there three years on Saturdays, scholarship.

LEVINE: You mean, you would go on Saturday?

REHBERGER: Yes.

LEVINE: And you would have classes?

REHBERGER: Yes. And I was very outstanding there, too. In fact, the teacher there, uh, I was doing figure drawing. And every time I worked on one, he said, "Stop." He said, and he held it up to the class. And he said, "See, he's got fire." And he, and he told me, he says, he thought I was very outstanding because he said it's with me all the time, not just once in a while, but it's always with me. So it was very gratifying.

LEVINE: So were you, what were you doing during the week while you were going there during the Saturdays?

REHBERGER: Oh, school, high school. Well, for first, the parochial school, and then high school. Oh, my parents, my father, of course, since we all had to go to work, you know, when we were kids, he sent me to continuation school. I don't know if you know where that is. It's . . .

LEVINE: At night.

REHBERGER: Yeah. But then I showed so much talent that they said, "Well, this boy has to go to high school." So they convinced my father to send me to high school, so I went to high school. And then I became class president. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then I, so you were still, you were being, you were good in all your subjects in high school. It wasn't just the drawing and painting.

REHBERGER: Well, my worst subject was mathematics, except algebra. I was very good in algebra, but I was not good in banking problems.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So then you graduated from high school.

REHBERGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then what did you do?

REHBERGER: Then I had to go to work.

LEVINE: What did you do?

REHBERGER: Well, I was, here was my situation at the time. The depression came along. And everybody was out of work. My father didn't have a job, my brother didn't, and my sister and mother. So, so I had so much talent that I supported all four with my artwork.

LEVINE: How did you, where did you sell . . .

REHBERGER: I did, I worked in places where we did commissions, like, for instance, there was a place called *Meyer Both*, it was called. And, uh, and I would draw a sweater, which he'd throw on the table, and I would do a very beautiful drawing, and then they said, "Who did this?" You know. So they said, "That little boy over there, you know." So I immediately was wanted. So everywhere I went I immediately got a raise.

LEVINE: And what were the drawings used for?

REHBERGER: It was for catalogs, for a catalog. Like Sears Roebuck catalog, stuff like that.

LEVINE: Wow. So you supported your family in the Depression by doing . . .

REHBERGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then did you, was that the beginning of, uh, of your art?

REHBERGER: Oh, yes. I do want to say one thing. (he clears his throat) Naturally I didn't like the idea that I was forced into a situation like that. So I wouldn't go near the *Art Institute* or a bookstore for three years. I said, "Well, now since I have to support everybody, I might as well do a good job." But then later on I couldn't take it any longer. I went near these places again.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And were you able to, when were you able to stop doing that and devote yourself to, um, to . . .

REHBERGER: You mean when was I able to not support them?

LEVINE: Right.

REHBERGER: Well, here's an example. For instance, I, I did a lot of work for a globe company. They were called *Replogle Globes* in Chicago. And he thought a lot of me. In fact, he thought so

much of me that he, uh, he wouldn't touch anything without me being the consultant to see if it would work or not. I was the artistic consultant. And then, uh, my brother eventually said, "Why don't you try to get me a job there?" So he told this, the owner, about that. Later on he became ambassador to Iceland, but he's no longer around now, this man, the globe man. So I, I said, "If you could give him a job." He said, "Well," he said, "if he's half as good as you are, he can have a job." Okay, so he got his job, and then he became his right hand man. And then he, he was, uh, and they had a retirement plan. In those days they honored it. Not like today, I guess they don't honor them when the time comes from what I hear to retire, they find some excuse, you know, you've heard of that, probably, and then they fire them so they don't have to pay the retirement. But, anyway, his retirement plan went through, and he walked off with two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. That's pretty good, isn't it?

LEVINE: Yes.

REHBERGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So then tell me a little about your art career, how that went.

REHBERGER: Well, my art career is, uh, well, it's exciting in this direction, that I could do anything. See, I'm not one-sided. I'm multi-faceted. I could do anything. So whatever they asked me to do, I did. Then I became, well, I became an art director. I was an art director when I was nineteen, and then, uh, let's see, what did I do? Then I worked in the studio, and I did multiple things. Then during the Depression there were four people, it was still the Depression, or near the end of the Depression, they broke away from that studio to open their own studio, and they took me along, because I showed so much talent. And then we, uh, opened our studio in Chicago, what was then the Diana Court building, which was a beautiful building. Then later on they tore it down. Now they put the Marriott Hotel over it now, but at that time it was beautiful. So I was making a lot of money then.

LEVINE: When you say it was a studio . . .

REHBERGER: Well, we did artwork for, commercial art for various concerns, like the Chicago Tribune, Armour & Company, the meat packers, and things like that. Books, all sorts of things. And, uh, I was always outstanding in that. And then, uh, then came, uh, in 19, well, then eventually came the war, right?

LEVINE: Right.

REHBERGER: So then I was drafted.

LEVINE: I see. And did you, did you go overseas?

REHBERGER: Well, no. I was very lucky. During the army, during World War Two, they tried to place people according to what they can do best. Like in World War One the artists would be maybe, who knows what they'd be doing, you know. In World War Two they tried to place them. And I had done a, I had done murals, war-time murals, war bond drive murals in Chicago, which

were in the Union Station in Chicago for twenty-five years, and then they tore the station down, so now they're gone. But the thing is, uh, when the, oh, when I was drafted, uh, there's a place outside of Chicago called the Fort Custer Illustrators. There was a branch of the army, and that's where I was drafted. And, uh, the next day, I tell you, I was very lucky, this is a real lucky story. So the next day the duffle bag, you know, we all had to line up, about a hundred and fifty people, to be shipped out for basic training. So, uh, I was, uh, okay, then they called off names, you know, Joe- something-or-other, you go to Carolina, you go to Texas, you go there, you know, and then they were all designated to go somewhere else. And then the line got smaller and smaller and smaller, and pretty soon it was down to ten, and pretty soon it was down to two, and then he called the other guy, you go here and there. And then he said to me, "And you come here." He said, "You report to Mr. Sealy, the Fort Custer Illustrators." So I had to report there, and I didn't have to do basic training. I was painting pictures for the six weeks that I was supposed to do basic training, and three of them were shown in the *Art Institute* at the time. So I was very lucky there. And then, then my luck continued. Then there was an outfit in New York City here called, uh, *Training Aids Division*. They were, uh, they were doing artwork for training aides, like booklets and things like that, and paintings, and whatnot. So they requested me, so I was shipped to New York to this *Training Aids Division*, and then I did a few booklets in the beginning when the rest of the time I painted for two-and-a-half years. So I was very lucky, I mean, really lucky. And they, well, one more thing. They told us, because some people, they wrote letters saying this is the, uh, what do you call, country club of the Air Force. It was the Air Force, the country club of the Air Force. But then they reassured us, "Look, somebody has to do it. Don't feel guilty." So, that's the way it was.

LEVINE: So then did you, did you go off as an independent artist?

REHBERGER: Yes.

LEVINE: After the service?

REHBERGER: After that I was freelancing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you have, do you have works that are, that can be seen?

REHBERGER: Yes.

LEVINE: Now?

REHBERGER: Yes.

LEVINE: Where are those?

REHBERGER: Well, November 9th, this coming November 9th, I'm going to have a one-man exhibition in, I made my studio into a gallery, so it can be seen then. Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, wonderful, wonderful.

REHBERGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Are there any murals, or large-scale works that are in any public places at this point?

REHBERGER: No, not now.

LEVINE: Not now. Uh-huh.

REHBERGER: Yes. There's one, uh, there's a mural in a Chicago church.

LEVINE: Oh. What's the name of the church?

REHBERGER: It's, uh, again, St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Well, um, we're close to the end of this tape. Is there anything that you would add, um, about your life, uh, subsequent to becoming an artist and being in this country? Is there any other particular point that we should talk about before we, uh, close?

REHBERGER: I would say, uh, obviously I always think this is the land of opportunity, and I worked my way up from doing commercial work and a lot of illustrating. I did a lot of famous illustrations, like *The Defiant Ones* for movies, *Moby Dick* for movies and stuff like that. And in 1968 I stopped that, and now I'm a complete, I'm a fine artist, and I teach figure drawing and anatomy at the *Art Student's League* of New York, *Art Student's League* of New York, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And have you, have you, did you marry at all? Do you have children?

REHBERGER: Well, no children. Yeah, I was married a couple of times, but we'll forget about that.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, all right. Is there anything else that, uh, that you would say about having come here as an immigrant way back when you were thirteen years old, and how that may have affected your life?

REHBERGER: Well, uh, I would say it affected my life directly, because if I had been in Europe during World War Two, all my school chums, they were all killed. So again I'm lucky. I'm a very lucky boy. Boy? (he laughs) Yeah.

LEVINE: And you mentioned to me, if we could just briefly, you mentioned something about a possible commission for your artwork in Austria?

REHBERGER: A possible commission?

LEVINE: That a possible commission for artwork in Austria, that didn't actually happen. Do you remember we mentioned that on the phone?

REHBERGER: Uh . . .

LEVINE: That there was a chance of your being, having some artwork shown in Austria?

REHBERGER: No. I think what I meant was, Vienna is supposed to have the World's Fair in 1995. Well, there could be a possibility to be a part of that, but since then they were, they're overcrowded, so they included Budapest, and I think now it's taken over by Budapest, so I don't know what's going to happen.

LEVINE: Oh.

REHBERGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. So then . . .

REHBERGER: So that has to be pursued, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay. Well, um, I think maybe we'll stop here. I want to say that it's really been a pleasure. I feel as though you could fill up many more tapes.

REHBERGER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: With your story. But this is at least a good overview of your coming. I've been speaking with Gustav Rehberger, who came from Austria in 1923, when he was thirteen years old. This is Janet Levine on October 2, 1993. I'm at the Oral History Studio at Ellis Island and I'm signing off.