

Narrator: Gertrude Biesman
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Place of Interview: Narrator's home, located at
8549 Ferris Avenue, Morton Grove
Interviewer: Yvonne Ryden
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INTRODUCTION

Miss Gertrude Biesman has lived in Morton Grove all her life. In the interview, she tells of her father working for Poehlmann Brothers greenhouses driving the horse from Plant A to Plant B. her mother worked for a short time at one of the onion houses in town separating the onions by size.

Gertrude also mentions chores that were done at home, her schooling and unpaved streets in earlier Morton Grove. She lives in the family home and describes the house and how her mother did laundry for the family without the conveniences of today.

GB: Gertrude Biesman

Q: Question asked by interviewer, Yvonne Ryden

GS: Georgiana Sim

TAPE ONE, SIDE A

Q: Miss Biesman, would you like to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about yourself?

GB: I am Gertrude Biesman and have lived in Morton Grove all of my life. Have gone to school here -- high school in Chicago and then I went to work downtown for a while. In the north part of Chicago, I worked at two companies. Then I settled at G. D. Searle and Company in Skokie.

Q: Would you tell us about your grandparents?

SB: Well, they were born in Germany. I do not know just where.

Q: Were your parents born here?

GB: They were born here. Yes.

Q: By here, in America or actually in Morton Grove?

GB: (pauses) In this area.

Q: I see.

GB: I do know what they did. An aunt of my mother's was visiting here, and she wanted them to come along with them in Wisconsin -- a place called . . .

GS: Silver Creek.

GB: Yes, that's right. And that didn't last very long -- just about one year. Then they came back here to Morton Grove and worked at the farm for about another year.

Q: I see. But they farmed originally somewhere in this area?

GB: Yes.

Q: And then they came and actually settled in Morton Grove. And in this house?

GB: In this house.

Q: That's very interesting. Did your father stop farming at that point then?

GB: Yes, yes. He worked here at Poehlmann Brothers. You've probably heard of that.

Q: Oh, yes, I have. (laughter)

GB: He drove the horses from Plant A to Plant B.

Q: How far was that?

GB: That was just on Dempster Street, just practically around...

Q: Oh, Plant A was on Lincoln Avenue and Plant B was on Dempster Street.

GB: Right.

Q: Did he do that all his life until he retired?

GB: Well, more or less, but he worked around in little places. He worked for Huschers.

Q: I see.

GB: And after he had worked at Poehlmann's . . .

Q: He worked at Poehlmann's perhaps until they closed?

GB: No, not quite. Because Huscher also had ice in the summer, and he went along with that. I guess he was the only one that drove the horses.

Q: Now tell me about your mother. What was her maiden name?

GB: Her maiden name was Suhr. And she was a hard-working lady.

Q: How many children did she have?

GB: Well, five counting me. (laughter)

Q: And are you the youngest?

GB: No, I was second to youngest. Yes, I had one sister and three brothers.

Q: Was the sister the oldest?

GB: That's her mother. {pointing to her niece}

Q: One sister and then two brothers and then you and then a brother.

GB: Right.

Q: you told me that your parents were married in 1900. They probably were living in this area at that time?

GB: Yes, they were.

Q: Tell us about your family. Your sister, Anna.

GB: All right. My sister Anna -- Peschke is her maiden name. She was born in 1903. And I have a brother who was born in 1904. And Grover was the third one, was

born in 1907. And myself in Morton Grove also at 1909. And another brother, Roman, was born in 1911. And they are all deceased except for myself.

Q: Would you like to tell me a little bit about what it was like to grow up in Morton Grove at that time? About being a child and how you helped or what you did, how you spent your days? Anything you remember.

GB: Oh, there's a lot of things. (laughs)

Q: Well, good. Tell us all about it.

GB: Well, we all were very happy together. Mother worked a little bit in what they called the onion house. The farmers brought onions in to the onion house and they had women working there to separate the sizes of the onions. And so we had a great time some days. (laughs) But -- oh, we weren't too naughty -- but anyway we were all together and played games by ourselves -- blocks and, ah, . . .

Q: I imagine that you played hide-and-seek and games like that.

GB: Yes. Of course, we didn't have many places to hide. (laughs)

Q: Why?

GB: It was all open. We had nowhere to hide.

Q: None of these houses around here were here then.

GB: No.

Q: I see.

GB: On this street they were on this side of the street. The next one was on the other side of the street. But then from there on, most of them were the other way. I can't understand that but perhaps it was who owned the property maybe. I don't know.

Q: Did you have jobs to do when you were a little girl?

GB: Yes, Mother wasn't there.

Q: What were some of the things you did?

GB: My sister did the washing of the dishes and I dried.

Q: Did the boys ever help in the house?

GB: No, there was always work for them to do. They had to chop wood. We had to go to the back to go to potties and that had to be cleaned. Oh, we also had gardens so they had to pick out the weeds and take care of that. We pumped our own water.

Q: Do you remember when you finally got an indoor bathroom in the house?

GB: Oh, yes. (laughs) I don't remember the date, but . . .

Q: No, no, I meant the excitement of it.

GB: Right.

Q: Well, there had to be sewers or did you have a septic tank? Do you remember?

GB: Oh, yes. A septic tank. And a big cistern. Yes, great big cisterns where mother used to in summertime keep the milk.

Q: So you were saying that you kept the butter and things that we would put in the refrigerator now to keep them cold, like milk, you kept in the cistern. And the water was that cold in the cistern?

GB: Well, it was colder than anything else. (laughter) I never tried it, I don't know how cold it was.

GS: Did you make your own butter?

GB: Not always, unless Granny went to help them to churn the butter. Well, finally we did get a milkman who used to come to the store.

Q: So the city ways finally came to Morton Grove. (laughs)

GB: Right. (alughs)

Q: Where did you go to school?

GB: I went to Grove School. I started there. And the other ones all went to the church school.

Q: At the Jerusalem Lutheran Church?

GB: Jerusalem. And the reason I went to Grove was because I fell in love with the teacher, I guess, (laughs) who came around in August to see about children coming to school. She was here and I was there with my mother and she thought I ought to go to school with her. She didn't really press it, but anyway I liked her and I assumed I was going to go to school there, so I went to school there. (laughs)

Q: The whole grammar school?

GB: No, later, I did -- seventh and eighth grade at the church.

Q: In doing these oral histories, I have heard everyone talking so complimentary about their teachers at the school. There must have been fine teachers over at the Grove School because everyone speaks so warmly of the teachers. Then where did you go to high school?

GB: That was in Chicago. That was -- I was trying to think of the name -- oh, . . .

Q: Schurz?

GB: No, not Schurz, but I think it was a branch of Schurz. It was on the other side of Cicero. And Addison, I guess it was. It was a two-year business school.

Q: When you graduated from there, did you go to work?

GB: Yes, I went to work in Chicago. I didn't like it there. I think I was there two years or three -- maybe three.

Q: You lived here at home with your parents. How did you get to Chicago? What was the transportation?

GB: Well, first of all, it was the train. And then they came around, some people in Skokie, which was at that time Nilens Center, and we went to school that way and bus. And this was, well, as long as I went to Chicago I went on a train.

Q: When you got off the train in Chicago, was it near where you worked?

GB: Yes, near where I worked. It was maybe about five blocks.

Q: I see, so you could walk it easily.

GB: Oh, yes. Yes, we were all walkers at that time. (laughter)

Q: So you worked in Chicago for a number of years, and then you came back to work in this area?

GB: Well, first it was on the North Side of Chicago, which wasn't very far.

Q: Were you working for Searle's at that time?

GB: Well, at the end, I worked at two places. One I didn't like at all, I didn't stay there very long, and the other one was on Lawrence Avenue.

Q: To go back a little bit to your childhood, you were saying that mostly you played with your brothers and sister. And then as you got to know other people at school, did you . . .

Gb: Right, then -- but we always had work to do, too. There wasn't too much playing at that time. We all had our chores and we had to do them and our homework.

Q: And did you have a lot of homework?

GB: Well, to me it doesn't seem as though it was too much.

Q: At the Lutheran School were the classes taught in German or was German just one of the subjects?

GB: By the time I went to school it was mostly English.

Q: Do you understand German?

GB: No.

Q: Did you understand German then?

GB: No, not very much, because I didn't have to. (laughs)

Q: Yes, you didn't have any use for it. You mentioned one of the teachers that came you liked so much? Was that Miss Catherine Mulvey?

GB: Yes, Miss Mulvey.

Q: And what grade did she teach?

GB: Well, she taught I think a little higher grades. I had a Miss Tredane (laughs) and I thought that was all her name -- the Miss included. (laughter)

Q: I think that was the custom at that time for the teachers to do a census -- to go from door to door to see how many children would be coming to school that year.

GB: Right. Yes, because there were many of them who didn't go to school for a while. Of course, that was mostly in the farm area.

Q: The children stopped going to school or never started?

GB: Well, they probably came in when the chores were done in the winter.

GS: When the growing season was, and the crops were in,

GB: Yes.

Q: You were saying that the homes around on this side of the street, which is the

east side of Ferris in the eighty-six hundred block, this block pretty much developed, but in the next block . . .

GB: You're talking about all of the street or just this block?

Q: Well, this street was paved.

GB: Yes.

Q: When you moved here was this a main street?

GB: Yes, I think so. The sidewalks were cemented. But the street, well, that was mostly for -- there weren't many cars, and I guess horses really don't like the cement either.

Q: No, I don't think so.

GB: And then on the other side of the block there were about five houses. And then after that was oats, I guess, which Poehlmann's had. They raised their own feed for the horses and stuff.

Q: I see. Tell me about when you were sick. Did you go to see the doctor or did the doctor come here and who was your doctor?

GB: Dr. Drostenfels. He was the only doctor here. (laughter)

Q: Was he actually in Morton Grove?

GB: Yes.

Q: Did he have an office here?

GB: Yes, in his own home.

Q: I see, and where did he live?

GB: Lincoln and Fernald.

Q: I see.

GB: There was a store at the corner and at the other -- there were two houses in there. One was the doctor and another family which had extra rooms and people from the florist here would have a room there you could rent. Then the next one was the Loutsch Butcher Shop.

Q: When you were ill then, was there a hospital nearby?

GB: No. You had to go in Chicago. Well, later they had one in Evanston, but our doctor would take us to Augustana.

Q: That's all the way down in the Near North Side. What about fun? What did you do

when you got a little older for recreation or what kind of entertainment was there? Do you remember?

GB: Not much. (laughs) Well, as I say, the girls always had to work at home. That was their chore. The boys used to go to Golf.

Q: Did you have cousins living in this area?

GB: Well, yes. Quite a few. On Sundays we would visit with the families.

Q: How about holidays? What did you do for Christmas?

GB: Well, we'd -- it would only be one family mostly that would come at a time.

Q: I see. Well, you had a big enough group . . .

GB: (laughs) Right. Then gifts -- you only got one gift.

Q: You got one gift?

GB: Yes. Each one, that's all.

Q: Were they handmade gifts?

GB: Well, often, yes, most of the time. I know I got a doll once. I couldn't leave go of that doll all night. (chuckles)

Q: Did you make gifts to give to your mother and your father?

GB: No.

Q: Or to your brothers or sisters? Was there any exchange of gift among the brothers and sisters?

GB: No. No, there was no money for that. Any pennies we might have made went to Daddy and Mother.

Q: You said you went to the church school so I imagine you went to the church. Was there a Sunday School?

GB: Yes.

Q: Did you go in the morning or on Sunday evening?

GB: In the morning.

Q: Was there anything during the week that you were expected to attend?

GB: No, nothing special, no.

Q: Did the children go to church services as well as Sunday School? They were expected to do both?

Gb: Yes, right.

Q: That made a long Sunday morning, didn't it. (laughs)

Gb: Yes. Well, we were used to it. That's it, and that's what we did.

Q: Did you have any special clothes like a Sunday dress that you wore?

GB: Yes, and only on Sunday. (laughs)

Q: Did you have special shoes that you wore or did you wear your school shoes?

GB: Yes, because during the day in summer we had sandals. And that was it. Of course in the winter, we must have had boots. I'm sure we did. I can't remember any, but we must have had boots.

Q: Sure, you must have. Like galoshes maybe with the buckles or something like that.

GB: Oh, not buckles. You had to tie it on, I guess.

Q: As you got older, were you in any women's groups or girl's clubs or anything like that -- as a young working woman did you have any . . . ?

GB: Not so much. We sort of drifted away in the village. And went with the other friends we had made. Of course we didn't go out too much -- even then. We only had about ten dollars to start working and, well, always graduated up, so . . .

Q: You mentioned that you can't remember whether Ferris was paved. The other streets probably were not paved.

GB: No. No, this was the first one. It still is the county, this street.

Q: Oh, I see. Ferris actually is a county road.

GB: Although the village does clean the snow.

Q: Do you remember when you were confirmed?

GB: Yes.

Q: How old were you?

GB: Oh, I think it was thirteen.

Q: Was there a special class that prepared you for confirmation?

GB: Well, it was the pastor.

Q: Would your mother have had a party then or a family dinner?

GB: Yes, I guess, but just the godmothers and godfathers or their family. They always had a family, so (laughs). . .

Q: I see. Were any of your family members involved with World War II?

GB: No.

Q: Your nephews might have been in there, but they were a lot younger. I'd like to ask you again about the onion house, because I heard that it was just on the west side of Ferris. Is that true or was it on the other side of the tracks?

GB: It was on this side. Well, if you go out you can see the buildings through some of the houses.

Q: Is that where Capulina crosses?

GS: Yes.

Q: And someone told me there was also a pickle factory there.

GB: Yes. I don't know too much about that one. Maybe one of those buildings was for a pickle factory.

Q: The onion house is still standing?

GB: Yes, it's standing.

Q: And is it being used?

GB: Yes, there are three buildings and they're all still standing.

Q: I'm going to have to look when I leave because I've heard about this -- the famous onion house. Were onions grown in this area?

GB: Yes. Oh, yes. There was one down to the west on Dempster, yes. And pretty far -- pretty close to Milwaukee Avenue.

Q: I see.

GB: That was the onion king (chuckles), and of course there were other ones, too. Smaller ones, but . . .

Q: Can you think of anything else you'd like to tell me? Did you ever go to any of the roadhouses in Morton Grove?

GB: No. I was too young for, well, maybe not. But pretty young.

Q: Well, maybe you weren't the kind of girl that went to roadhouses.

GB: Right. (chuckles) Well, we were pretty young though, too. One time I did go, and I was very unhappy and didn't feel right at all in the place. And that was the one on -- oh, what did they call that? The Dells, I guess it was. I just didn't feel right at all.

Q: Well, if you weren't having a good time, then no sense going back. Tell me about when you worked at Searle's. You said that you worked there for a number of years.

GB: Yes.

Q: You were very happy there?

GB: Oh, yes.

Q: How long did you work at Searle's -- in one location or the other?

GB: Thirty-five.

Q: Thirty-five years?

GB: It was a long time, yes.

Q: When they moved to Skokie, I imagine you liked that.

GB: Oh, yes.

Q: Much more convenient?

GB: Right, much more. And I knew a little more, felt better, what have you.

Q: And you were living all that time in this house and your parents were living here, too?

GB: Yes, I was not married, and so I stayed.

Q: Maybe not marrying is what enabled you to live longer than your brothers and sisters. (laughter) Let's go back and just talk about the house itself. It's so interesting. Let's start with the fact that the house didn't have a basement.

GB: Well, this house didn't have a basement. There was a small area that was left for Mother to wash her laundry, which she had to carry in the water to wash the clothing. You had to pump.

Q: A pump in the backyard?

GB: A pump . . . (pauses, chuckles)

Q: Did she heat the water?

GB: Yes, then she had to -- how did she heat the water? I don't know.

Q: She probably had a big wash boiler and a small stove of some sort?

GB: Maybe. Yes, but how did she get it from upstairs to downstairs . . . (chuckles)
I really don't know.

Q: Eventually the house was raised and you have a full basement underneath now?

GB: Yes.

Q: And the attic was not finished?

GB: Yes, that's right. The attic was not finished. And Mother would dry her clothes up here in this area.

Q: She carried the clothes from this small area that's now part of the basement. She carried them up two flights of stairs and hung them up in the unfinished attic.

GB: Right. And carried the baby -- Roman (laughs) -- many a time, and she did hurt herself, her arm. One night trying to carry him upstairs while she was drying the clothes. Going up to pick them up, I guess. I don't know what it was, but she hurt herself pretty badly that time. Now where do we go?

Q: Where did you sleep when you were little?

GB: My younger brother and I slept in the same bed, with Mother and Father on the other side of the room.

Q: That was downstairs on the first floor.

GB: On the first floor, right. And I still haven't found where Anna was. (chuckles)

Q: Well, your brother slept in another bedroom?

GB: Yes. That was a small bedroom, too.

Q: When was the second floor finished? Around the time when you were about twelve?

GB: yes, I would say that. Twelve or fifteen in there.

Q: Did you then have a bedroom upstairs?

GB: Not my own bedroom. My sister was with me then. The two of us slept in here, and we had two doors. Two bedrooms in there where the two boys slept. And then Roman -- the youngest one -- was still downstairs. And then later, they built more. They changed the stairwell and made a bedroom in that side.

Q: I see.

GB: And there was a bedroom, I guess, where Roman slept in.

Q: So eventually the house had how many bedrooms?

GB: At that time?

Q: Yes.

GB: One, two, three, four.

Q: I see. Your parents slept upstairs at that time?

GB: Right.

Q: This has been very interesting. Thank you so much for letting me come and record what you remember of your childhood. And I wish you well in the future.

GB: Well, thank you.

TAPE ONE, SIDE A ENDS