Esther Horne

The Real Rosie The Riveter Project

Interview 2

Interview Conducted by

Anne de Mare & Kirsten Kelly

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For The

Tamiment Library, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives
Elmer Holmes Bobst Library
New York University

Interview: Esther Horn

Interviewers: Anne de Mare & Kirsten Kelly

Date: February 17, 2010

Place: New York, New York

De Mare: To begin, can you tell me your name? Can you introduce yourself and tell me how old you are?

Horne: Sure. I'm Ester Horne, and next Wednesday, I'll be 87 years old.

De Mare: And where were you born?

Horne: I was born in New York City in 1922.

De Mare: And…um… could you just describe your childhood a little bit? Um…where you lived? Um…your experiences as a young girl? Were there…what kind of hopes and dreams you might have had for yourself, for your future, if you can remember? Um…any anecdote that you might want to tell me about your early life before, you know, when you were a child that really, y'know, stands up in your mind?

Horne: Well, a lot stands up in my mind from my early years. Uh, I was born in Harlem, and um… we lived there… Um, my father had his office…he was a chiropractor…his office was on One Hundred and Eleventh Street, between Lennox and Seventh Avenue, and we lived at, uh, Two West One Hundred and Twentieth Street, which is right at Fifth Avenue and across from what is…what was then known as Mount Morris Park. Today it's Marcus Garvey Park.

And, um, I have many memories connected with our using that park. I remember it has a hill in it, with a bell tower. And I believe the bell tower was from many many generations prior to the a 1920's. It was used as a fire alarm, I think. And, um, my brother and sister thought it was hilarious recalling incidents that took place in the park. My brother is twelve years older than I. My sister passed away when she was 92. But they could still giggle about pushing Esther in the carriage down the hill while they was on skates, and, uh, the carriage crashing into a tree. It was hilarious. To them. To this day, I have a dread of moving through space without control. I can't…the thought of jumping from a plane with…even with a parachute…I'd have to be knocked on the head first. So that was one memory.

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Um, I also remember my grandmother coming to stay with us for awhile and her taking me to the playground in Mount Morris Park. And I was on the monkey climb, and uh, the very top – I don't know what I was trying to do – but I, I fell straight down on my head. And I was afraid to tell Bubba, because she would get hysterical. So, I didn't say anything. And I just remember, any time she crossed a street, (arms in the air) "Aaah ahhh ahh!!" she would s—- so worried about getting run down. And the traffic was NOTHING. We didn't even have traffic lights, y'know? But anyway, um…

De Mare: That's wonderful. That's a wonderful story. Where was she from?

Horne: From the Ukraine..

De Mare: From the Ukraine…

Horne: Um … my…this is too involved maybe, but um, my father and mother were childhood sweethearts. They lived in the same town. And, um, my father left - I guess he was

in his late teens - and he went to England…I don't know why or how. But uh, he lived there for several years. And I have pictures of him. He was very natty and a handsome guy. But they…they had an arrangement that they didn't discuss with their relatives.

And when he came to America, he worked on East Broadway as a jeweler. And his mother had been in the jewelry trade too, and she never came. She never saw him again. I'm named for her. But, uh, he… he was a watch repairer and a jeweler. And after a couple of years, he and his cousin opened their own store right outside of Ladies' Mile. They were on Twenty Seventh Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenue. Then he wrote to my mother, now, and uh, she came to America. And, she had an uncle here. She stayed with him a couple of days, I guess, and then they got married.

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So my brother was born on Twenty Seventh. And uh, when my mother was pregnant with my sister… my brother… my brother was about eighteen months old… she went back to the Ukraine. She said she was homesick. She missed her parents… I don't know the whole story. At any rate, she

was pregnant and had an 18 month… in her arms. Um…when she went there, she left my father here. He wasn't about to go back.

So in the years that they were apart, he moved to the Midwest, and he went to school at the, um, Chiropractic Institute. I don't know the full name of it, but it's in Lombard, outside of, uh, Chicago. And, um, my mother, with her two children, was with her extended family, and they lived through Programmes, the Revolution, Civil War, and a World War. And in, uh, I guess it was 1920, there was an exodus from their town, very much like *Fiddler on the Roof.* I picture their town was like Anatevka. But, uh, they had adventures coming to America that I grew up hearing about and…I represent the reunion. That's why there's such an age gap.

And, um, at any rate…we lived in Harlem, and um, my father wanted very much to move to the west Bronx, but my mother was not interested. She was into everything she had lived through. She never got out of that. It was really bad. But it is kind of cute…um, when my cousins had postcards, that the uncle living in America wrote to her father and grandfather - they corresponded regularly - and in one of them, that the great grandfather, who ruled everybody, wrote "We think they have a secret agreement,

‘cause whoever we send to her, that the matchmaker brings, she finds something wrong, and she won’t say what or where or when.” And my mother held out...until I think she was 23, which was practically an old maid. But that was their story, and uh…so she finally got here in 1920.

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And then he died suddenly in ‘29. And, uh, he died July 30th. And then October 13th, the market crashed, and our lives changed dramatically, ‘cause we had a very comfortable middle class existence. And my mother was distraught. She never got over him. And she lived to ‘94. That’s a long time. But uh…

De Mare: Can you talk a little bit about what she did for money when your father passed away?

Horne: It’s a mystery. Uh…he had some money. Uh, he was mostly invested in the New York School of Chiropracty. He was a dean. He had a private practice, and he taught…and he was an administrator. So that went down the tubes. But there was…there was some money. And um, I guess we lived on it until it was gone, because when my…my uncle advised

my mother to invest what she had, to buy a store or something, and Lee and Jack, my brother and sister could help out…they were in high school and college…she was so offended that he…he would bring up a subject like money to her when she was so grief stricken. They didn't speak for about five years. They're very dramatic people.

So, um, my mother's compatriots advised her to move to the East Bronx, to slash her overhead. My sister was in high school and working in Woolworth's, after school. My brother was at City College, and he worked, um, for the subway news stands. So, of course they contributed. And then, at some point, probably three or four years later, we went on home relief. And this was, uh, something the family never got over, because we had known another way of living, and uh, we were always different from our neighbors. I was different from the other kids, because I remembered the kind of clothes I'd had, and going to the movies with my parents, and going to the theatre – Yiddish Theater - and restaurants, and little trips, and what not. And suddenly there was nothing.

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My mother didn't know how to handle money, and she didn't care. So that was that. But, um, it was a very painful time for all of us…with our pride. And, um, our neighbors didn't care much for us, I imagine, 'cause my mother always locked the door. The neighbors couldn't float in…in and out…like they did with each other, for tea, or something, and a chat.

De Mare: Do you, um…what was your first job that you had then? Did you go to work as a young girl before you worked during the war? Do you remember what you…can you talk a little about, like, your early work experiences?

Horne: Sure. Um, in high school, I took an academic track, because I didn't doubt that I'd go to college. Y'know, it's something a Rubinovich did. You didn't discuss it. And, uh, I graduated in June of 1940, and I had heard that the depression was over. But the news didn't really reach me, or a lot of other people. And, um, I had to get working papers, 'cause I… I was seventeen. I think the cut-off date was eighteen at the time. And, uh, I found I didn't have anything to offer on a job. I…I…anything I knew about job hunting I learnt from my pals, my friends. So we used to, uh, answer ads – want ads, in the Journal

American. I don't know why…all the kids said that was the place to look for a job.

And my best friend and I went to, uh, a local high school at night to take commercial courses. I hated bookkeeping, 'cause I hated anything to do with numbers. And, um, I did know typing, 'cause that was the course in high school that everyone took. But, the thought of being an office girl – I mean, it was a little better than a shopgirl or a factory worker…oh! However, when I started taking job interviews, at seventeen, I looked like twelve. And I really didn't have anything to offer. So I took a test for WPA, and I earned fifty-two eighty a month.

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At that point, my brother and sister were out of the house. They were both married, and each had one child. So, again, it's something you didn't discuss. You had to help out, and Mamma needed help. She was always sick…she was a hypochondriac, but she was sick, certainly emotionally.

And, um, I worked on WPA…no that wasn't the first one. The first one, I went to the US Employment Service, and they sent me out on a job at a press-clipping bureau. You

had to sit and scan newspapers for clients' names. And, they sent me out on a twelve-dollar-a-week job…so I said fine. It's twelve more dollars than I have. And when I got to the place and was interviewed, the boss said "You will be an apprentice for the first three months, and that means you'll earn nine dollars a week." I said…I didn't have a choice…I took it.

And it was the kind of job where you couldn't talk to anybody. You just had to sit. And scan. I remember lunchtime, I was reading *War and Peace*, and the boss said "You're supposed to be studying the accounts!" My time…! But y'know, first exposure to the work place. Then after three months, he called me in, um… "We're having a layoff." Just when I would have started earning twelve dollars a week. And I said "Layoff? What am I going to do?" He says "It's not my problem." So that was lesson number one.

And, uh, I went to another press-clipping bureau after that, and I lasted about a week 'cause I ran my mouth. And I think while I was on that nine-dollar-a-week job, I wrote to the Home Relief, and said "Thank you for your help, but I'm working now." And I cut us off. Didn't ask anyone – I just did it. And I went back to the US Employment Service when I was laid-off, and the interviewer yelled at me, and he says "Do you realize that you scabbed?" And I said

"What?! I'm not a scab!" He said "You are! We told you it was a twelve-dollar-a-week job! Why did you accept nine?" I said, "I didn't know!" Lesson number two.

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Then…then it was, um, WPA. I worked on a fertility study…in the 1880s. I was assigned to the 1880s. I was called a junior clerk, because of my age, but I was doing the same work as the clerks for fifty two eighty a month. They were getting sixty five or seventy…I don't know what. And somehow we lived on that, and um, we were vitamin deficient, needless to say.

And I don't know who told me about it, but there was a union, Local 65 - the wholesale and retail workers union. And they were down on 9th St., and they moved to Astor Place. So they had a hiring hall. And they…they had factory work. "What am I going to do – factory work?" But I couldn't do anything else, which is too bad. So…I started working in factories. And factory jobs ran a few months each. There'd be a layoff, and then you'd go to the next one…and the next one… So one, um, one job was in a suspender factory, and it was nasty. The atmosphere was nasty. The workers were nasty to each other. It was awful.

And, uh, so I was glad when I was laid off, 'cause I never dreamed of quitting anything.

And then I got a job at Parfum Lorelei – putting labels on perfume bottles, and filling bottles, and changing labels. When, uh, the female products got old… they got too dark…we put male names on, like Fisher's Stream and …y'know…um… And that was a good union shop, and before long I became Shop Steward. I was 18 by then, anyway.

And, uh, the workers were very interesting. They were mostly refugee women from Germany and Austria who were upper middle class in Europe, but here they were in factories. And, uh, one of them was married to a doctor. I remember her...she was like a doll, a cute little doll… never had worked in her life. But she and her husband managed to get to America. Her husband was a doctor in Berlin, and here he… I think he was a cleanup man or something, in a hospital. Eventually, when he did learn English…years later, I learned…he took the medical boards, and he became a licensed doctor here too.

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But there were other people who told me that their first jobs they cleaned houses, and um, I was introduced through some of them to an art historian who was a housekeeper. I saw her years later at MOMA. She was leading a group discussion on Art History…very interesting woman.

De Mare: That's wonderful.

Horne: Yeah.

De Mare: That's wonderful that you ran into her later on.

Horne: Yeah. And, uh, we were very active, all of us. Lunchtime, if there was a shop on strike, we'd go help them picket. And, uh, it was a very interesting union to be in, because they, um, had thousands of members, and no one had thought of organizing them before. So they had, um…they opened a night club on uh… They bought a building eventually on Astor Place, and the night club was staffed by union members - the entertainment, the music, the singing, the dancing, everything. And that's where I hung out for years, years later. 'Cause you could go Saturday night, and there was no hard liquor or anything. And, uh,

there was a show called, uh, *North Atlantic*, that was a parody of *South Pacific*. And, uh, it was just great. We were all young, and very politically aware.

Now I remember going to a big meeting at Madison Square Garden, and they launched a program called Seven and Seven [InterNatural]. They were going to organize seven thousand workers in seven months. And they did. For all I know, they're still a union…I don't know for sure, but…

De Mare: What year would that have been…what time frame is that?

Horne: Oh, I would say about '41. Something like that…1941.

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And then…um…December 7th happened. I was engaged that day - we didn't know about Pearl Harbor until the evening. And it … not that we didn't have a big party or anything...I didn't get a ring…but that was the day I met my boyfriend's family. So we said "We're engaged." And then we found out about Pearl Harbor. And we married three weeks later. I was 19. That was not Bill Horn. No comparison.

So, um, at that time…uh, I guess workers were harder to get, because the aircraft plants way out on the island were building planes for a long time before we entered the war. They had contracts, and some people were getting very rich. And it helped workers very much…out on the island. And I remember there was an arsenal in New Jersey, Picatinny Arsenal. People came up from the South because they knew they could get work. And, uh, so on my level, in New York City, there were more factory jobs available. And women always worked…uh, we took it for granted that we would work, because no one had money, and young couples who got married understood they would both work and try to save against the time when a child would be born.

So…so it was through…I guess from Local 65, yeah, I got a job at the All Craft Manufacturing Company on Hudson Street. I think it was Hudson and Leroy or something. And we made parachute suspenders and pistol belts for the military. And I…my job was on, um, I think it was a kick press. We put the metal lining that comes around…um…where you put your shoelaces in? Well, the parachute suspenders had those too…I forgot what you call them. But that was my job. And people were assembling and stuff like that.

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The workers were very interesting to me. It was always very, uh, diverse population, ethnically. And it made it interesting. The work was boring. Factory work is always boring. It's the most boring thing you can imagine. So you get to talk to people, and that…that what's so important.

So, I worked at All Craft and then…I don't think I quit it…they could have had the end of a contract or something where they had too many workers…I heard about a job, probably through my union, in Long Island City, and that was Gussack's Machine Products. Um, it was Local 1227 of the United Electrical Workers Union. So, that…I spent two years there. And, uh, it was a big education. I not only became a machine operator, but I met some wonderful people. And the kind of people who came out to work in factories were intellectuals as well as not completely educated people – all kinds of backgrounds. Some young people who were waiting to be conscripted, but didn't volunteer. And, uh, I grew a lot. I felt I grew intellectually, and socially, in that period. Um, my husband, my then husband, went into the service 6 months after Pearl Harbor. And many of the young women at

Gussack's were in the same position – their husbands were in some branch of the military.

So when I first went in, I hated it. First of all, I had to travel. I lived in Washington Heights, and uh, I think fare was still not a dime…uh, not nickel. Many have gone to a dime somewhere along the line. And I had the trip every day to Long Island City. I took the A train from a Hundred and Seventy Fifth Street to Forty Second, and there I took the Astoria line – it was the BMT, as I recall – to Forty Fifth Road and Court House Square. It's probably some other line now, the F train or…or the G. I don't know…I don't know at all.

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But um…the whole area…I don't know what it's like now…was factories and uh, cold water houses. Poor…poor. But um… the first apartment I was sent into was smelly and dirty, and the work was terrible. I stood at a kick press. A kick press is something you kick, and something comes down. You know it's like the games we play now. But um…after a couple of months I went to the boss and said, um, I want to be released. 'Cause you had to be released. The man power commission had control over the number of

workers who could come and go or something…I don't remember the fine details. But the boss said, "You're doing something for the war effort." I said, "But surely I can find something else to do," because it was terrible. They said, "I'll find another department for you. Don't go away. You can't anyway." I don't know if that was true or not, but I accepted it.

I was transferred out of that department into the machine shop itself. And, uh, that was a big change. There were machines here – you felt like you could do something. Um…I don't know if you've ever been to a machine shop, but the uh, drill presses and the lathes and the screw machines and the milling machines all had big belts with the pulling on the ceiling…flapping…noise. And, uh, you worked in a spray of turpentine or something. You cleaned yourself with motor oil. But you felt you were doing it for the war, y'know. So, it was interesting, cause I didn't feel very competent in anything, having been the baby in my family. And, I..I kind of grew up feeling that my hands didn't work too well. Oh I could…I could find a drill press…I could solder.

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Um, tricks were played on…on newcomers like me. I'd be sent to the tool room – do they call it the tool

room…some name like that…it was like a big cage with all kinds of tools – to get a left handed hammer or ask for a bastard file, just to make me blush, y'know? So, I grew with it, but I couldn't make friends with anybody somehow, and I was always a friendly person. I found out subsequently that people found me very aloof. But I…I met some terrific people there from every walk of life, every level of education. And the…the shop itself had been, uh… the bosses were MIT profs who got together and managed to get some kind of cockamamie contract to form Gussack's. And uh…we never knew what we were working on. It was always part of something that was going to be sent somewhere else to be. And um…it was a very wonderful atmosphere. We were half deaf from the noise. I was living with my sister at the time. I'd come home from work, and she'd say "Number one, you stink. Go take a shower." My…even your street clothes reeked…your work clothes certainly.

But um…lunch hour, for the longest time, we would sit around…sit on crates with our…our long work aprons and pants, or whatever. And one of the bosses, Moe Kammer, would read a scene from a film, and we would discuss it. Remember the differences in education I saw all around me –

people, some of whom had never finished eighth grade…it's just…entranced. It's still moving.

Anyway, we all went to see Othello. And we saw Paul Robeson, and Uta Hagen, and Jose Ferrer as Iago…for a factory!

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Anyway, some of the kids were drafted. Two of the girls joined the wax. I wanted to join the wax in the worst way, but my husband, who was in the service, wrote back "No wife of mine is going to be in that traveling whore house!" Now my friends were not whores. One became a photographer. They trained her, and she was sent to India. The other one stayed in the United States and was…I think she was on a guard duty, or something, in Florida, of prisoners of war. But I thought it was so romantic and important, because we were fighting Fascism. However, we were also fighting Fascism on the homefront.

So, I became very active at Gussack's and made a lot of friends. And I was on the Labor Management Committee, which…y'know because we were all pulling in the same direction, there were Labor Management Committees that handled things like music…because every factory had music playing; it was supposed to increase production. And

uh…the union had a grievance committee anyway, side by side.

But we would discuss things like the question of music, as I remember. We had "Musack" – canned music, and nobody could stand it. We found out that one of the young guy in shipping, in the shipping department, was a music buff. He had a very eclectic taste, so he was put in charge of developing a music library. And, uh, I think the guards at the door were in charge of putting the records on and taking 'em off in different periods. And I remember that was my first exposure to uh…jazz, New Orleans jazz, because I was raised in a home where I wasn't allowed to listen to the make believe ballroom even, and that was pop music. My mother said "That crap…!" We listened to the opera every Saturday afternoon – that was good… and the Jewish news hour, The Lone Ranger, Chandu the Magician… things like that. But I couldn't hear Janis, so…

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I learnt all about New Orleans jazz and stuff, and uh, I remember when I first heard the one o'clock jump or something, I must have broken a drill… "Play it on…!" Jazz is all [up]. But we also heard Broadway musicals and

classical music. I was exposed to The Rosen Cavalier for the first time. I know I never heard it any other place – it was new to me. Richard Strauss was new to me. And, um…so that was very educational.

And at one point, I um…a member of the management and I were sent to Washington, DC for a conference on morale in the workplace and the war place or whatever. And uh…I think I have a picture of the man I went with. And that was fascinating, because we went in a parlor car, and I had never heard of a parlor car before or since. But there were individual swivel seats in the car – not the bench kind of arrangement – and you could eat there, or drink or whatever. And I talked to some of the, uh, people from other parts of…factories and so on. And I remember having a long conversation with an architect. And I still remember him making me aware of the fact that in a place like uh… the Upper East Side in New York, or the Upper West Side, when buildings were put up, and floors…floor plans were made for apartments, the maid's quarters were always very small and usually attached to a kitchen. The other rooms were huge, or…beh beh beh… I said "Wow!" Because the tenements weren't like that – the kitchen was the main room, y'know?

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But uh…I was learning a lot in a lot of different ways. And through this period, I also felt inferior to my brother and sister because I hadn't gone to college. I couldn't figure out how to get there, because I had gotten involved with my union activities. And uh, that was the story for about ten years after high school. But then I said "Enough". I did it at night. My brother and sister did too, so…whatever. But, uh…as far as Gussack's was concerned, it was a major education.

However, after two years, I was boiling. I had started working at forty cents an hour. After two years, I made it up to forty five cents and hour, and I was working side by side with men who were getting seventy five or eighty five cents an hour. So I went to the shop steward first, and I said "We have to do something about equalizing the pay. It is not fair." And he said, "This is not an issue now. The war is on." I went to the boss, which I didn't plan on doing, and I said "This can't be. I know I can get a job tomorrow starting at seventy five cents an hour." So he said, "I won't stop you."

So the next day I was at the Electronic Corporation of America in Manhattan, and they had a different kind of contract. It was called Cost Plus. So they had wonderful

conditions for the workers. We had a break where we could have tea or coffee or milk that was served – we didn't have to buy it. And the place was light and clean, and I learned how to be a radio wireman. We wired sets for radios that we used in the tropics in the South Pacific…

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…and we worked many many hours. Sometimes, we had to make a convoy that going…so there was one period where I worked 21 days without a day off, and I felt like a zombie, because all you could do was go to sleep, eat, go to work. And we worked overtime, and you got time and a half for overtime and double time for Saturday and Sunday. It was really something, and then…

De Mare: When you worked for there, how much did you get paid, because you left the other…?

Horne: We started at seventy five cents an hour. And uh…it was just another world. Then - I don't know if it's because the war ended…it ended in August…VJ day was August of 1945…it must have been that it was the end of the war - the contract ran out. I got a job at the Electronic

Devices Corporation on 26th St and 12th Avenue. And uh…at probably…still at 75 cents…I don't know, I can't remember that. And I stayed there until I left the country. Went to work somewhere else.

De Mare: Well…And why did you leave the country?

Horne: I was…I wanted to travel. And I grew up hearing all the wonderful places my family had been to that I hadn't. I felt cheated. And I met someone who told me you can get work overseas, and that's what I did.

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De Mare: …what your experience was actually working side by side with a man? …if there was a sense of segregation, or discrimination, or where you…how you felt about that, if you can remember? It doesn't have…you don't have to hit every single one, but is there…is there an event that you remember? Um…or was it just the money?

Horne: It was just the money, because the…uh…atmosphere was pretty cooperative, as I recall. We were all there for the same reason, and um…I don't know…

De Mare: That's fine.

Horne: The uh, the hierarchy…there was a hierarchy. The tool and dime makers were at the top. Um…they, they may have been able to design blueprints for us to follow. I was in the middle group that could follow a blueprint and change bits on a machine or what not. And um…then there were people who just did the assembly work, y'know. But like I mentioned, we never knew what we were working on, so it was intriguing.

De Mare: Yeah.

Horne: But we knew when you…we were on the drill press, you were drilling holes into some metal thing…maybe aluminum, maybe brass. And sometimes you had to ream it … so you change the bit…different thing. And then some you had to put threads in, so…because screws were going in. And some, you were depressing um…a dye that would dig a serial number into … whatever. The only time I got hurt was on that. I

was working and someone called my name insistently, so I turned around to see …*(hand motion chopping at her other hand)*… and it was the only time in two years in that shop that I got hurt. Um…mostly I was used to take over when someone else got hurt. I'd be put on the machine. I think I, I was very careful. I wasn't really fast…I wasn't the greatest production person, but I was a safe one, and uh…

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We had incentives. Uh…if you had an idea for improving some movement or placement, or whatever, you could win a savings bond. And I, I did have a couple ideas, so I got a…we used to get a war bond for 18.75, and in 10 years it would be worth 25 dollars. And it was really good. As a matter of fact, they had uh… a deduction plan so that you could save toward them on your own anyway…which we all did. I think for 37.50, you got a bond that, at maturity, was 50 dollars. So they were good incentives.

De Mare: Now were you…your husband was overseas. Can you talk a little about your home life while you were working

in the factory? Or did…you said you were living with your sister.

Horne: Yeah.

De Mare: Um…

Horne: And her…my sister had two children at the time. Uh, her husband was in the service too. And um…I was happy living with *her*. Actually I was living with her, because of a crazy thing in my family…I wanted to leave home when I was eighteen. My mother was very very difficult to be with, and I had…I was alone with her from age twelve. My brother and sister married and left the same year, and I felt totally abandoned because of uh…I don't know if it was just generally attitudes towards children in those days, or it was just my family, but when my father died, nobody took into account my feelings. As a matter of fact, because he died in his sleep, everybody was in shock. But I was completely destroyed, because my…my daddy told me a story every night. Every night. And when he was tired, and he would try to say "Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Esther," I would howl. "No! I want a *real* story, Daddy!" So I think he read both Bulfinch's mythology and

told me a myth every night, 'cause in later years at school I came across these stories I seemed to know…I didn't know how come. My brother told me how come.

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But um…the…this last night of his life he came home, and he said, "I want you to sleep with Leah tonight. I can't tell you a story. I don't feel well." I said, "But Daddy…" That was it. During the night, he died. So I woke up to hysteria all around me, and um…you know in a Jewish family, the burial takes place before sundown. So this is…he, he died probably at dawn. And I remember crawling all over him trying to force his eyes open, and watching his lips turn blue. I mean, he was still warm when I was there. And uh…our neighbor came and whisked me away. I never saw the interment. So for years I had fantasies about hearing a knock at the door, and I would yell at him "Why did you leave us?!" But the knock never came.

And uh…everybody was grief stricken. He was a very well-loved person, and uh…it was a tremendous funeral. There were hundreds of people in the house. I mean, it spread like wildfire, because it was just before his 47th

birthday. He was 46. And uh… he worked til the last minute. But uh… my only support and solace were my sister and brother, but they were kids. I mean, I was 6; they were 16 and 18. So…

De Mare: you were … they were already on their way out the…yeah… So when…so you went to live with your sister, because you were both in the same kind of situation? Now, was she working as well during the war? She had kids…

Horne: She had kids, but they were little. But uh…no, I wanted to leave home. I was living alone with my mother. And my brother-in-law, who I had known most of my life, 'cause Lea and Ali met when they were about 12 on the block in Harlem, um…said "It's not right. Esther will be alone. Your mother will be alone. No. Let's get a large apartment, and we'll all live together." My sister knew better, but she couldn't stand up to him. So, my mother gave up her home.

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And we all moved together, but inside a couple of months, it did not work. My brother-in-law drover her…no, she

drove him crazy, and the kids, and everybody else. I was in heaven – the load was off my back.

To answer your question, I was living with my sister, and um…she…she wasn't working at the time. No, the kids were too little. But uh…she didn't…she was a chiropractor…she didn't get to have her own practice until her kids were grown. She worked in between – she had all kinds of jobs too. But um…not at that time. We had an allowance from the government as wives. And between that, and my contribution, we managed. We managed quite well. But…

De Mare: Do you remember what the allowance was from the government, for being a…? And there was…because you were…you were the wife of a…of a serviceman.

Horne: Yuh. Um…I know there was a song Twenty One Dollars a Month Once a Year, or something, but it was more than twenty one dollars, I'm sure. However, uh…when I broke up with my husband, I gave him the total bank account. I had never touched a penny of that allowance, because he got me very angry about it. Um…he used to ask me for an account in every other letter, and I felt it wasn't mine. So, I

think if I remember correctly, the total after three and a half years was twenty two hundred dollars.

[Other Voice – Kirsten Kelly]: You never...you never used it. That's an incredible story.

Horne: Yeah…because everyone made fun of me for handing him the money. But I wanted no part of him or the money. I haven't changed in that regard. I would do it again today.

De Mare: You said something really interesting…um…when you were talking about, y'know, feeling as if you were part of the effort…that you were...and you said you were fighting fascism overseas, but we were also fighting fascism at home. Can you talk a little bit about what you mean by that? You said that when you were talking about being in the labor union.

00:58:01:12----------

Horne: Well…while most of the country was pulling together in the war effort – it was the most together we've ever been, in my memory – there were dissident elements. There was the…the _____Verein in um… Yorkville, neo-nazis. It

was a "sports club", but um… There was Father Coughlin coming out of Little Rock…I think it was Little Rock, Arkansas. He used to have a weekly program spewing hate. Stuff like that I was very aware of. And uh…all kinds of things were going on in the United States. And a lot of stuff happened after the war as well. And um…there's always been that element, and uh…anti-semitism, anti-foreigner, anti-black, y'know? But uh…you knew you couldn't fight alone. I mean, you handle situations that happen to come up, but uh... Something I learned from an uncle of mine, my mother's brother who lived to a hundred…we all adored him…and he told me how he kept his equanimity when my mother cracked under all the horrible things they had lived through in Europe, and their other sister and brother too had a…anyway, this guy was always calm. And he was fun - he was fun to be with. And he told me when I was quite young "I always decided if there was a problem in my life, I had to make a decision what... First I would think about it: is it my personal problem or is it a social problem, a group problem? If it's a group problem, I'm not going to agitate. I'll do what I can. If it's my own problem, that's different." And I said "Hmmm. Very interesting,"

01:01:01:07----------

'cause my mother, who had a very strong sense of social justice, didn't differentiate, y'know? It was all mixed up. And uh…I came across a character like her in Dickens. I'm not sure if it was Bleak House or one of …one of…other novel. There was a woman in it, Mrs. Jelly Belly, who had a whole brood of kids, who were totally neglected, and a husband who sat in the corner looking stunned. But she was a fighter for the people of Africa, the people who lived along the river Belanga Manga, or something, and she was out there fighting all the time, and her family was so…terrible.

My mother was very interested in social issues, but she did give me a good appreciation of different kinds of people. She was very open to meeting people from different cultures, and even though she was an observant Jew, she sent me to Presbyterian Sunday School for quite a while. There was…uh…the church was very near us…um…near Mount Morris Park. Um…she was friends with the minister and his wife. So I went to Sunday School knowing I was a Jewish kid – I mean, I never had a doubt. But at the same time, she would make me give my toys away that Daddy had given me to a nursery school that was on the block. And uh…I had to

go to the school with her to make the donation, and I saw all these kids, and it looked like they were having a wonderful time. And she said, "You see that? There mothers go to work, and they have to be there." And I thought, "I wish I were. I wish I were there." I didn't want to give 'em my toys, but y'know. They were to be pittied, because their mothers worked. Anyway…

De Mare: Now when you…you said when you started working, you didn't feel like you could do anything. You didn't feel like very capable, and through working you got to fe- …can you talk a little more about that in your life…how y- …how the experience of working…if it gave you confidence and if it gave you…what you went on to do? Can you talk a little bit about … about that?

01:04:06:02----------

Horne: Well, it…it gave me, um…it gave me an appreciation of…of the fact that I have something to offer. And uh…the guy I married kind of indicated that he was hot stuff, and uh…I wasn't sure about that. And his sisters used to say lovely things too – I thought they were kidding, so I let them pass. But when my friends heard how they came on,

there were fights, “We always thought he would marry a beautiful girl, or a rich girl, and he married you.” Y’know? They meant it. So I didn’t feel particularly attractive, and uh…the reason I got married is related very much to the war. Everything got speeded up, meaning you knew somebody, and maybe he got killed, something terrible would happen, and uh… We were not promiscuous – I didn’t sleep around or anything. And no one ever told me this, but somehow I understood, you didn’t have sex until you got married, and you didn’t get married unless you were in love. But in high school, two of my best friends once admitted that they weren’t virgins, and I thought my head would split, because I respected them – they were nice kids from good homes, they weren’t bad girls. So I said, “Wow. Is this possible?” But I didn’t have sex. Near. You know, I was with a group of 9 girls from the East Bronx – we had our own taboos. But um…this guy was the first affair that I ever had. He was eight years my senior. I was eighteen. And um…my reaction…”What’s all the fuss about?” y’know? I was very sophisticated – didn’t know anything, but I was very sophisticated. And um…

01:06:53:23----------

Like I said, because of the tensions of the war in Europe, even before we were in it, everything was speeded up, and we were at an age where people start getting married anyway. He was 27, I was 19. And uh…maybe…I have often thought about this…maybe on a subconscious level, not on sub, I had to justify my going to bed with him. That's why we got married. And I was very emotional about his going, and stuff like that… but …alienated pretty soon…pretty soon. 'Cause, uh, I think he was in the army six weeks when, uh, he invited me to Fort Dix to visit. And I came out with a group of other young women – it was in New Jersey – and um, he told me that a group of the guys went into the town one night, and he ended up in bed with a woman, and he couldn't do anything 'cause it wasn't me. I … I was furious. I said "Would you like a medal?" why, y'know? He should not have told me that…and what was my feeling? And then, the business with the accounting… And I personally was getting stronger and more appreciative of myself as a total individual…that I had a brain - even though I didn't go to college I had many interests. And uh…I was very bothered. And then it was a mess when he came home. I didn't want to live with him; I had met somebody else. But the reason I met somebody else was that this…this was… But there was such…there was so much, um,

propaganda about worrying about the guys overseas: don't send Dear John letters…y'know it's a terrible thing…you hurt the guys morale and his feelings, he's trapped, there's nothing he can do, blah blah blah. So I never told him. This happened…I met this other guy…I think I was 21 or 22, and uh…that was another mistake. That was not Bill Horne either. But um…

01:10:00:00----------

He was furious with me – the first guy. He said, "If I had known that you didn't want to live with me, I would have stayed overseas, because I had someone in Australia." I said, "That's nice." I thought he was just saying that to make himself feel better, or whatever. He was not in combat duty. He was on the ground crew of the air force, stationed in New Guinea, and…with frequent furloughs to Australia. And he had met a woman, and he lived with her for about…I don't know how many years. I just…no indication to me.

Uh…I got a letter once where he was going on and on about Christmas and … he imagines what it was like, "remembering last year – the annoyance and the irritation of trying to choose". And I said, "What is he talking

about? We're both Jews. When did we go shopping for Christmas?" And then a letter came from this young woman. He told me her name, and a letter came from her. So I knew she existed. I forwarded it to him. Of course, he blackened my name amongst all our friends, or tried to and they all backed away from him. He never told them about this other woman, and I didn't either. So, he…he's 95 now. I have not seen him for many many many years. He doesn't live in New York. And uh…it was part of my growing up, to go through that.

But when I see how kids act today, I know they're right, that I…in my day, you didn't just live with someone, unless you were a very revolutionary type of person, which I wasn't. And uh…so you have your affairs, you make your mistakes, and you grow. I did it legally, and I was scared to death of getting married ever again after the second one. I mean, I got married when I was 19 and when I was 23. But many years later, I met Bill Horne, and I was 37 when we got married. Different ball game. Totally different. But on social relationships, I've changed so much.

01:13:05:11----------

But I love hearing the branches in Roots and Branches, when they…sometimes…not when we're having an official workshop, but y'know, you hear about their exploits and their concerns with the opposite sex, and all that. I love it. I absolutely love it.

De Mare: Awesome. Um…can we take a little break? I've got a … what I think we'll do is I'll put the…

Horne: I feel like I'm talking about someone else. You know it's so long ago.

De Mare: Whenever you want to start. You on, Kirsten?

Kelly: Yeah.

Horne: Okay, you have to tell me. I can't really see you.

Kelly: Action.

Horne: This picture was taken outside Gussack's Machine Products in Long Island City where I worked. Um…these are my work clothes.

[Break in taped interview]

01:14:19:07----------

Horne: I met him in a drama workshop. I was in a theater group. The second one was fascinating too – crazy, but fascinating. But Bill was the best. He was my husband.

Horne: This picture was taken outside Gussack's Machine Products in Long Island City. And I'm dressed in my work clothes, um, without the long, uh, machine shop apron. Um…this picture, I was somewhere between 19 and 21 in all the pictures. This was taken by one of the…uh…Gussack's coworkers. His name was…uh…Paul…no, not Paul, excuse me. Joe. It's a long Polish name I don't remember. He was a little guy, badly hunchbacked, and he was a photographer. He was stunning, and he asked me to model for him. I was surprised that he wanted to take my picture. Looking back, I see I was cute. But at the time, I didn't…have no notion of it. I … I saw everything that was wrong with every feature. Oh well… And these were my high heeled shoes I never had again. I wasn't able to walk, even then. And this is a picture of my husband at the time. We were married December 31st, 1941. I was 19, and he 27.

01:16:59:04----------

And this is his kid brother Leon. And this picture is me with his sister. We were wearing…I think we were wearing pistol belts…could have been wearing parachute suspenders…I'm not sure. But it was part of…um…a parade celebrating, uh, the war effort. Everybody for the war, or some…some name like that. Very inspiring. Not cynical, inspiring.

And this is my sister's husband. He was the father of two kids when he went into the service. And this is a friend from Gussack's who went into the Wax, and he was assigned down South. And these three French sailors were interesting. The USO used to post, uh, different things that were going on around New York City to which servicemen were invited for free. And they came to a union dance that we were at, because they were nice kids. They came from Brittany, the three of them, from fishermen's families. And the fishermen had a very strong union, they said. So they felt at home with union people, even though they didn't know a word of English. And we all used our high school French to the best of our abilities. My sister made a dinner for them. And they had a good time and so did we.

We all had sore jaws from trying to speak. I don't remember their names, but they were very cute.

Oh boy. This one came off. These are shots that were taken, um, not where we worked, but in the office. This is the, um, several members of the, uh, administration, and the shop steward. And this was the labor management committee. And this fellow and I were members of the committee.

Let's see…oh, this man and I, who…I don't remember his name anymore…went to Washington together, to the Labor Management conference, the National Conference. And, this is the shop steward with the two members of the committee. Oh, heck…I'll fix this later.

01:20:06:02----------

Um…this picture was taken at the union 1227 hall. I think it's our grievance committee. These are all workers from our machine shop. And…this picture is of some of the, uh, young women who work side by side with me, or could have been in another department as well. This is the union hall. Can you see the poster, behind the dancers?

De Mare: Can you read it to me?

Horne: I can't see it, I'm sorry.

De Mare: It's okay. I'm going to try to get…I can't quite get in there… It says "Every man, woman, and…something…is a …" I can't get that one. But this one says "Take care! Idle hands work for Hitler." That'd be great if you could read that one. Hold on just a second.

Horne: This one says "Take care. Idol hands work for Hitler." And I remember another one said "Lose lips sink ships." And "If you…if you drive alone, you drive with Hitler." Because um, gasoline was rationed. And these were my buddies. She's the [Wack], she… Elaine Turr and Marie LaCapra. Elaine is dead now, and I can't find Marie. I'd love to…I'd love to see her. Um…this is the, um, Halloween party at the union. These are all people from the shop. And here's…here's Joe, the photographer. Let's see, uh…everybody here was from the shop. I don't remember the young man's name at all, but this, this was uh…Roz Emerine. Her husband was in the service too. I think she may have worked at a shop nearby.

01:23:00:02----------

And then the rest of the pictures are just socializing with people from the shop. Um, I think first vacation I ever went on was with friends from the shop, and we'd have picnics and what not. And these were some of the people who had listened to uh…scenes from Othello, and gone to see it. It never, never would have occurred to them. "Shakespeare? What's that?" But proved to be wonderful. I don't know how interesting you'd find these, really. There just young people having fun in a country setting.

But…it was such a fertile period. I think 19 to 21 probably is for everybody. You're leaving your…you're really leaving your childhood, whether you're in college or at work. Don't you think? And, um, every day is kind of exciting for what you can learn. When I went to college, I was really ready for it, much more so than I would have been at 17.

Oh, this was my friend's husband. We kind of grew up together on the East Side. He was in D Day, and um…he wrote a poem about his feelings on the beach at Normandy. It was very moving, I remember, and uh…at the time. I don't know what's happened to him. His name is Louis Miranda. Um…he was a high school graduate. He may have gone on to college under the GI Bill…I don't know.

01:25:54:11----------

But that GI Bill was wonderful - it changed the lives of the, uh, returning vets. They were so lucky - much luckier than the kids coming out of, uh, Iraq now, and Afghanistan. Although, I understand they're doing…there's some talk about their having a … something similar, an education for the returning vets. But…

Kelly: What was the GI Bill exactly?

Horne: You were covered…you were supported by the government while you got an education, a higher education, and some very dear friends of mine, who were artists, went to France for the GI Bill. And uh, a couple with a child… and uh, the husband was the artist. He went to study with Leget, whose work is in the UN. Y'know, they did things like that. And uh, people who could never have dreamed of going to college - they didn't have the money, or they didn't live in New York City where they could get a free education - doors opened for them. They also had special housing for veterans too – like Levitown,in Pennsylvania. Levitown in Long Island. Affordable housing for the

returning vets, and their families. It was really very good.

Kelly: Esther, what happened when…one thing we didn't touch on was…when the war ended and the men came back, what was the change…what was the change for women like…with the circle around you? And for you?

Horne: I left…that's when I left. I went overseas to work, so I'm not that tuned into it. I was away for a couple of years. And um…it seems to me that, um, a lot of jobs just closed down completely - plants that were ad hoc, so to speak, for the war. So nobody had those jobs, and if some of the returning vets went to school, it may not have affected too many office workers. I'm don't know what the situation was in factories, but I don't remember that was any kind of depression, remember hearing anything like that after the war. I think things were pretty good for a long time.

01:28:59:04----------

Maybe that a lot of women wanted to stay home at that point. Or…there were some husbands who did not want their

wives to work, because it made them less male. That was a big thing with a certain level of society. Not the upper classes, but really the poorest of the poor might have attitudes like that. They also didn't want their kids to leave home to live on their own…it was not nice. Nice girls and boys stayed home with their parents til they got married…after the war too.

Kelly: When you came back, were there differences that surprised you in terms of the role of women, and …?

Horne: Well, I went right to work when I came back. Um, I work in a stock brokerage, and I stayed there about 4 years. So, I, I preferred to go to a one, one gal situation - I didn't like office politics. So I was unconscious, I think, of what was happening generally. I couldn't speak. But I started college on the post war period. I guess it was about…I started college 1949 or 50, and um, at that point, I was an executive secretary. In between, I had picked up skills. I studied speed writing and uh, that qualified me as a secretary. But then, I, I went higher up, and um, nothing bored me more. I mean, at least in the factory you could talk to people…about things that mattered, y'know? But um, I was very fortunate. I

worked for an outfit that was walking distance to Hunter College, which I attended for the next 9 years. It took me 9 years, because I had no reason to rush, and I had many interests…looking back. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was very active socially, and I was painting at the time…I indulged everything that I loved to do. Um, I can't speak to the question of…y'know, I can't even generalize.

01:32:19:09----------

Kirsten: Right. No, that's fine. I was just wondering if, y'know what…what your experience was, which is exactly what you told me.

Horne: Seems to me none of my friends were…was complaining about not having work…didn't hear that at all. But that's just a microcosm, you know. But, uh, and also we went into the McCarthy period, and union activity plummeted. White collar workers were not organized, or if they were, they didn't get too far because of the attitudes of the workers themselves. You know, the union if for factory people, and I know in…as a…when I became a teacher, and the union was organized, a lot of teachers said "I'm not going to be in a trade union. I'm a professional." Okay.

But, Bill Horne and I became friends, because he was very active in organizing teachers. I, I was always attracted to him as a colleague, but I remember him coming around with a petition, and I said "What am I … what are you asking me to sign? Y'know, I don't sign very easily with this McCarthy business." We were…there were still remnants of it around that late. But…Bill went to school under the GI Bill, but down south. He went to LSU, Louisiana State University, and he had been in the navy about 5 years, from age 18 to 23. So…

Kelly: You think of…just when people, y'know, sign up that young. And even the people who are signing up now, just how much at that point in their lives, when their 18, y'know, how much it affects your whole life.

Horne: Yeah. It was really does affect your whole life.

01:35:00:19----------

I mean, uh, Bill was in the South Pacific, and, um, it troubles him to the end of his life…nightmares…the horrors he had seen. And he was a radio man on a destroyer, I think. But, uh, somewhere I have a documentary where he

was interviewed on his war experiences down south. It's right in there somewhere. But, uh, I don't think anyone I knew was unaffected. But, uh, for the post years, I don't know. I think a lot of domestic industry started up again…luxury stuff, fabric stuff, textile stuff. And uh, New York City, which I understood was more of a trade city than an industrial city, still had a big garment center down here, furriers…furrier center, the floral center. They were wholesale, and they employed a lot of people. So maybe that's…I don't think there was a depression after, I think there was a boom. And a lot of babies were born then. Now I think there's a bigger boom. I don't know what they're going to do about the school situation with all the, uh, wartime babies that are being born now…huge, huge. But, I think the 50s, aside from the political arena, y'know, with McCarthy, was a fairly good period. Uh… Stuyvesant Town, y'know, in Manhattan? Originally, the idea was to, uh, make affordable housing for returning vets, because my friend Blossom, whose picture is here, signed up when her husband came back for a one bedroom apartment. I think it was going to be about 45 dollars, or something, a month. And when it came to move in - Metropolitan Life Insurance owned Stuyvesant Town – they

raised the rent to 57 dollars, or something, and these kids couldn't afford it. So they never moved in.

01:38:07:14----------

And then there was a question of negro families. I think there was a little discrimination – there was noise about that. Met Life built similar housing to Stuyvesant Town, in East Harlem, on the banks of the Harlem River. They call it Riverview…? I'm not sure.

De Mare: That's exactly what it is.

Horne: Yeah. I visited people there, and it looks just like Stuyvesant Town. But that was, that was in our growth of the post war period. Um, I was living in the Heights, Washington Heights, and then I moved down to the Lower East Side. I finally found something I could afford, because I was still supporting my mother. Her rent was higher than mine. But I lived on Henry Street, between Rutgers and Pike, at a cute little apartment. Two rooms that were about ten by ten each, for 42 dollars a month. And, um, I was working in Yorkville as an executive secretary. And then, I was there 6 years, and then I married Bill, and

Bill had a darling apartment on 10th and Bleeker in the Village. And when I pass that area coming up from a workshop downtown, I get a pang. It was so wonderful living in the Village. I loved it. But when we had Adam, our son, it was no place. It was a walk-up, I think, 2 flights up. But we had a duplex apartment. It was 3 rooms. The bedroom and the bath were upstairs. And uh, I go my apartment, house, on 77th St, and I feel nothing. It just shows to go ya.

My name is Esther Horne. Uh, I'm 87 years old, and during the Second World War, I worked first at All Craft Manufacturing Company on Hudson Street, um, making parachute suspenders and pistol belts. And after that, I worked at Gussack's Machine Products in Long Island City as a machine shop operator. Um, it was a very important and interesting time in my life.

De Mare: Great. Thank you so much, Esther.

Esther: Thank you.

[End of Interview]