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Eunice Progulske

Rosie the Riveter
World War II Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by
Julie Stein
in 2010

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Eunice Progulske

Table of Contents—Eunice Progulske

Interview 1: August 11, 2010

Tape 1

Childhood in West Springfield, Massachusetts – father worked as paper salesman - mother's death when Eunice was seven – participation in interdenominational Congregational church – experience at West Springfield High School – father and grandmother's political beliefs – Reaction to Pearl Harbor – rationing food, clothing, gas – father gave up job to work in war industry – most of her male friends from high school were drafted – worked in a small wartime factory after high school making shell loaders and gyroscopes- joined Cadet Nurse Corps after leaving the factory – nurse's training in New York City at Metropolitan Hospital – description of Cadet Nurse uniforms – living on Welfare Island during nurse's training – basic science training at Bellevue Hospital – graduated in 1947 after the end of the war – worked at Wesson Maternity Hospital after training – experience of living on Welfare Island – memories of VJ Day - few changes to her life after the end of the war – women's roles changing -

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Interview 1: August 11, 2010
 Begin Audiofile 1 08-11-2010.mp3

Stein: Alright. So today is August 11, 2010. This is Julie Stein and I'm sitting here with Eunice Progulske for our first interview. So the way that we usually start these is by asking our narrator to tell us their full name and when and where they were born.

01-00:00:22

Progulske: Okay. I was born February 15, 1925, in the Wesson Maternity Hospital in Springfield, Massachusetts. My father was William M. Hopler and my mother was {LuLu Curley?} Hopler.

Stein: Hopler?

01-00:00:44

Progulske: H-O-P-L-E-R

Stein: Okay.

01-00:00:48

Progulske: I spent part of my early time in Springfield, and then when I was about five, we moved to West Springfield.

Stein: Is that just the next town over?

01-00:01:00

Progulske: Yes.

Stein: Okay.

01-00:01:01

Progulske: And I spent the rest of my years in West Springfield, until I went to nurses training. So I was— Let's see. How old was I? I must've been nineteen, I think.

Stein: Okay. What were your mother and father's professions? What did they—

01-00:01:24

Progulske: My father was a salesman. He worked for paper companies. And it was so different then. They sold types of paper, reams of paper. And that's what he worked for.

Stein: Did he sell mostly to offices?

01-00:01:42

Progulske: Well, companies, like printing companies and people like that. He had a whole area that he did. And my mother died when I was seven and she didn't do any— She had been in the paper business, too. That whole area, there were several, several big paper mills. But that's all changed. I don't know where

they make paper anymore. Mother just stayed home in those days. But she had been a secretary, I think, in one of the paper— That's it. I can't tell you.

Stein: Were they from Springfield as, well?

01-00:02:26

Progulske: She was from Holyoke and he was from Springfield.

Stein: Okay, so they stayed pretty close to home.

01-00:02:31

Progulske: Oh, yes, they stayed close to home.

Stein: And did you have brothers and sisters?

01-00:02:35

Progulske: I had one brother that was seven years younger. David. He's now dead. But of course, he went on to college, too. But he was in the service. He went to college, then in the service, I think that's the way— But when the war came on, the kids here don't— We tell them about you got so many stamps for shoes. You might have one pair of shoes a year. And the food was rationed. Nobody really suffered, but we were more inconvenienced. And of course, you had gasoline rationing, you had all those things. Air raid wardens, where you had to have black curtains in your windows and things— [laughs] It just seems ridiculous. But anyway, that's the way it was.

Stein: Yes. Some people that I've talked to have said that it was easier when the rationing came because they had had such good practice during the Great Depression.

01-00:03:42

Progulske: Yes.

Stein: Could you tell me about what your memories are of the Depression?

01-00:03:47

Progulske: Well, my father always had a job, so I never— I don't remember anybody in the family that didn't. We were fortunate, I guess. So the Great Depression really— I was young and it didn't really affect me that much.

Stein: After your mother died when you were seven, were there other family members that came in to help raise you and your brother?

01-00:04:12

Progulske: No, my father hired a housekeeper. And then in another year, he married a very good friend of my mother's. So we were taken care of.

Stein: So there wasn't very long without a—

01-00:04:26

Progulske: No. No.

Stein: —woman in the house.

01-00:04:27

Progulske: It's hard for people to understand that you had gas rationing, you had all these things, and you really just lived with them; they were there and that's the way it was. When I went into nurses training, then you had to take your stamps and give them to the school, as I remember, where I lived. You couldn't leave your rations home with your parents, you had to take them where you went.

Stein: They had to come with you. Yes, I'd love to talk about that in more detail in just a minute. Did you have a religious upbringing in your childhood?

01-00:05:17

Progulske: Pardon?

Stein: Did you have a religious upbringing?

01-00:05:19

Progulske: Not really. We went to the Congregational church— Well, my father was brought up in an inter-denominational church, which is rare.

Stein: And inter-denominational church?

01-00:05:30

Progulske: Yes. It was very rare, but there was one in Springfield and that's where he went. My mother was brought up in a Congregational church, but then she became a Christian Scientist. So when I came along, they took me to Congregational Sunday school. And they would go to church some. But it wasn't a real religious feel.

Stein: Right. Were there other organizations that you remember being important in your childhood?

01-00:05:59

Progulske: [Added by Eunice Progulske during editing: Between the time I was ten and fourteen, I belonged to the Girl Scouts of America. I attended Girl Scout Camp in the summers.] When I got older, the YMCA.

Stein: What type of things would you do with them?

01-00:06:04

Progulske: Well, they had swimming and all sorts of things for teenagers, and dances. Many of us used the YMCA. And I don't really remember anything else. We just went out and played. It was so different. You went out and played or you read books. And I did a lot of reading.

Stein: Yeah? Do you remember any of your favorites?

01-00:06:29

Progulske: Oh, Lord.

Stein: [laughs] You don't have to.

01-00:06:32

Progulske: I have to think about that. I can't remember the names of some of them. There's one that I really liked, but I can't remember her name now. [[Added by Eunice Progulske during editing: One of my favorite authors was Jean Stratton Porter.]

Stein: But you were always a big reader as a child?

01-00:06:44

Progulske: Yes. For recreation, you didn't have TV, you didn't have all these things, so we did a lot of outdoors— I did playing outdoors.

Stein: Yeah. People talk a lot about how neighborhoods were really different back then, that they were actually communities.

01-00:07:05

Progulske: Oh, yes. Yes.

Stein: Did you have a lot of close friends on the block?

01-00:07:09

Progulske: Oh, yes, you would. Yes.

Stein: Where did you attend school?

01-00:07:16

Progulske: I went to the schools in West Springfield, and then I graduated from West Springfield High School. And then I went to Metropolitan Hospital School of Nursing, in New York City. Now, that is part of the department of hospitals in New York City. Bellevue was in it, and I know we went to Willard Parker for our contagion studies, and that was basically it. Metropolitan was out on Welfare Island. [laughs]

Stein: Right. [laughs] Yeah. Well, I'll come back to that, too because that sounds like a fascinating story. At West Springfield High School, can you tell me a little bit about what high school culture was like at that point?

01-00:08:11

Progulske: Well, I think there was always the girls that were very popular and pretty. But I think in that era, you knew there was always somebody that had more money than you had, you always knew there was somebody who was going to be more popular than you; but I don't think it bothered us, the way it is now. That's the way it was, and you went on and did your thing. For me, that's the way it was, anyway. But it wasn't anything that— all the stuff that goes on

today. You accepted, you knew who had money and who didn't and who was more popular, and you just— I had a good childhood. I had a good time in high school.

Stein: Yeah. Was there a very wide range, terms of the wealthiest families and the poorer ones?

01-00:09:16

Progulske: No, not much, I don't think. There might've been in some of the Springfield schools, but not there.

Stein: So some historians now are looking at things like dating in high school or dances or sort of the more social aspects.

01-00:09:34

Progulske: Well, I don't know. I always went to the proms. I didn't really date. They didn't date. Some did, but a lot of them didn't date until they got out of high school.

Stein: Do you remember any students getting married in high school?

01-00:09:54

Progulske: No.

Stein: Was that not something that happened?

01-00:09:55

Progulske: I think one girl got pregnant, and that was something. It just didn't happen. It was a whole different world than it is now. I'm so glad— Well, I've got grandchildren now, but I couldn't *begin* to try and brings kids up now. [they laugh]

Stein: Well, you don't have to, so— So you were in high school during the Depression, during those years.

01-00:10:28

Progulske: Well, it was almost over, but it was, yes. Well, the war started—

Stein: Was it your senior year of high school?

01-00:10:36

Progulske: In December of my senior year in high school, that's when the war started. But I don't know, most of the kids I knew got along all right. None of us had a lot of money; we didn't go out to dinner and do all those things, but we got along pretty well. I'd wear a dress on Monday, and I'd wear it again on Wednesday. You rotated your clothes and your mother didn't wash them every time you wore them. Things like that. I was fortunate, I had an aunt that lived in New Jersey. She was a maiden aunt. She used to buy me— Well, probably I had more clothes than some did, but nothing— We always ate well.

I just feel that the Depression was really bad, but I was just fortunate. I didn't have to— We didn't do a lot of fancy things, but we made it.

Stein: Was it something that you were very aware of? Even though your family was, it sounds like, doing quite well, do you remember that that was sort of the topic of conversation at the time?

01-00:11:58

Progulske: Oh, yes. Yes. Everybody worried about the Depression, there was no two ways about it.

Stein: Even if it wasn't necessarily really hurting your family?

01-00:12:07

Progulske: Yes. Well, just like today.

Stein: Exactly.

01-00:12:11

Progulske: All my children are well employed, and some of my grandkids— The teenagers are the ones that are having trouble finding jobs.

Stein: Do you remember your family ever talking about Roosevelt or about any of the New Deal Programs?

01-00:12:37

Progulske: Oh, yes. My father was a die-hard Republican. And it didn't matter who he was, what the man had done, if he's a Republican, he voted for him. That was an era where people were— you just did— Now, my grandmother was a Democrat. And he used to say, "She's an old lady; she doesn't know any better."

Stein: This is his mother?

01-00:13:04

Progulske: Yes. But she read the *New York Times* from cover to cover every day. Well, that's another thing; people read the newspaper. Newspapers, we'd get the morning and the afternoon, and everybody read newspapers. At least in my family, we did. And today, my kids read newspapers.

Stein: Was it rare that your grandmother was such an avid reader and knew so much about politics?

01-00:13:30

Progulske: For some, it was. But she went to, I think it was {New Briton Normal?}, back in the 1800s. Not many girls went to college then, but she did. And my aunt went to college. And my father could've, but he decided not to so he didn't. He would've had to work hard. They didn't have a lot of money then, but they managed.

Stein: Where is your family originally from?

01-00:14:03

Progulske: My father's mother was from Middlefield, Connecticut. And my great-grandfather was {Jesse Miller?}, and his wife was {Roxanna Cole?}. And those were the two families that owned about everything in that town, brothers and sisters and cousins. So that's— And my mother's family, my grandfather worked with the wire weavers union, which is part of making paper.

Stein: Wire weavers?

01-00:14:41

Progulske: Wire weavers. He was chairman. I don't know what they called it. And he used to travel some, but to all the different places where they did paper making. And the wire weavers would— That's what he did. They all were originally from Philadelphia. But they settled in Holyoke. Came up to Holyoke because there was three or four big Mills in Holyoke, see. But that was so long ago.

Stein: Yeah. But it sounds like you have very long roots in this country.

01-00:15:15

Progulske: Well, we do. I do, I mean. We made books for our children about ten years ago, with all our ancestors and pictures on both sides.

Stein: That's really wonderful. Okay, so 1941, you're in your senior year of high school. Do you remember how you heard about Pearl Harbor?

01-00:15:43

Progulske: Yes. I was at my grandmother's house, sitting in the living room with my aunts, and it came over the radio. That's how I remember it. There's some things you do remember. But I do remember that.

Stein: Yeah. What was everyone's initial reaction when this—

01-00:16:00

Progulske: Horrified. Everybody was horrified. And the next day, people went out and enlisted.

Stein: Wow.

01-00:16:09

Progulske: A lot of them kids.

Stein: Did you have a sense— Some people talk about now knowing whether the attack was going to stop at Pearl Harbor.

01-00:16:19

Progulske: I had a lot of friends that enlisted when I graduated from high school. And I hate to say it, but most of them died. That group was— one boy, a real nice

friend of mine, was on Iwo Jima, and— But it really shocked the world, I think. And of course, things were so different. Traveling then was *entirely* different than now.

Stein: Did you ever travel in those days?

01-00:16:54

Progulske: No. We'd go back and forth to Connecticut; that was traveling in those days. [they laugh]

Stein: Right.

01-00:17:00

Progulske: That was it.

Stein: Do you remember, before Pearl Harbor, whether you knew anything about the war that was going on in Europe and in Asia?

01-00:17:09

Progulske: Probably we did, because everybody in the family read the papers, but I don't remember.

Stein: So Pearl Harbor really was a flashbulb moment—

01-00:17:19

Progulske: Yes. Yes, yes.

Stein: —when everything changed. So you mentioned a little bit about rationing and blackouts. Can you describe some of the immediate changes after we got involved in the war?

01-00:17:33

Progulske: Well, you didn't have as much meat. And you didn't have as much butter. Those are the two things that I know the most. And I know shoes and gas. Those are the four things that I think probably would be the most— I can remember when you had to go register for your rationing. I think it was at the school. And several of my friends and I helped direct people to where they were supposed to go. But that's all I can remember about that.

Stein: Did you have to use margarine instead?

01-00:18:15

Progulske: Oh, yes. Yes.

Stein: Do you remember mixing it or any of—

01-00:18:19

Progulske: Oh, yes. The white margarine was— you got the little thing of orange coloring and you worked and worked and worked it in.

Stein: Was that something that you did or your stepmother?

01-00:18:31

Progulske: My stepmother would do that.

Stein: Okay. And so then you were highly rationed on shoes, also. Did that just mean that you couldn't buy new ones, and that you had to be very careful with the ones that you already had?

01-00:18:42

Progulske: Both. Both. You'd get—I can't remember—one or two pair a year.

Stein: What about when you had to go to the prom or special occasions?

01-00:18:54

Progulske: Well, the proms were over before the war. So we had no problem there.

Stein: Now, with gas rationing, were you driving before that?

01-00:19:06

Progulske: No, I didn't drive.

Stein: So it didn't change.

01-00:19:09

Progulske: No, I took the bus everywhere. Everybody took the bus. You thought nothing of taking the bus; that's the way it went.

Stein: Did your father drive for his job?

01-00:19:23

Progulske: Oh, yes. He had a car. He had to have a car to drive.

Stein: Right. I wonder how he managed.

01-00:19:30

Progulske: Well, after the—I can't tell you when, I can't remember; but he stopped his job and he worked in a factory doing something during the war, which just killed him. He hated it. But he did it. A lot of older men had to do that.

Stein: Was it in the war industry?

01-00:19:54

Progulske: Yes, like in the armory or— All the industries around there, they all stopped what they were doing and just did war things. So that was a big change.

Stein: Was there ever any chance that he would be enlisted?

01-00:20:15

Progulske: No, no. My father was—

Stein: Because he was too old?

01-00:20:17

Progulske: —too old. [[Added by Eunice Progulske during editing: He was in his fifties.]

Stein: Did he served in the First World War?

01-00:20:20

Progulske: Yes, he was in the First World War I.

Stein: Do you know where he was?

01-00:20:23

Progulske: He was a cook in France.

Stein: Oh, wow. That sounds like a nice job, under other circumstances. [laughs]

01-00:20:30

Progulske: Yes. That's what he ended up being, a cook, which was fortunate. I think he was a little older when he went in, when he was drafted.

Stein: Do you think that's why he ended up as a cook? Or was that something he was just talented at?

01-00:20:43

Progulske: I don't know. He could cook, I know that. So anyway. Lots of men didn't, but he would do some of the cooking.

Stein: You mentioned blackout.

01-00:20:58

Progulske: Yes. See, I can't remember it very much, but I know you had black curtains and you pulled the curtains down at night. And you'd have somebody in your neighborhood that was the air raid warden, and if it was necessary, he would check and let you know that there was light showing.

Stein: Wow.

01-00:21:16

Progulske: And of course, also most people painted their lights on their car, halfway down, black. So you could see something, but you couldn't see it all.

Stein: Wow. So it really sounds like you were living every day with sort of the fear of—

01-00:21:35

Progulske: Yes. Well, no, I didn't fear very much, I guess. It was a way of life and we had to live with it.

Stein: Right. Right. Did you have a Victory garden, do you remember?

01-00:21:49

Progulske: We always had a big garden; it wasn't a Victory garden.

Stein: Okay. [laughs]

01-00:21:53

Progulske: It was always a big garden, and my mother canned a lot. Well, of course, you couldn't freeze in those days; nobody thought of freezing stuff. But my father lived from one seed catalog to another. That was his hobby, was gardening. And so we always had a big garden.

Stein: What was the catalog?

01-00:22:10

Progulske: I don't know, Burpee's, I guess. Burpee's seed catalog.

Stein: And you would just order seeds from it every time?

01-00:22:16

Progulske: Yes, quite often he'd order. You couldn't go get plants like they do now, as I remember. I may be wrong, but I don't remember him doing that. Mostly it was just planting seeds.

Stein: And how about war bonds?

01-00:22:34

Progulske: They came on after, after I went to work. I think I probably got some war bonds at work, but I don't remember that.

Stein: Okay. Do you remember a big presence of any of the marketing, the posters or the—

01-00:22:52

Progulske: No, I don't. I wish I could, but I don't. Of course, that was almost seventy years ago.

Stein: Right. [they laugh] You have a remarkable memory anyway. How did people follow the news of the war? Was it mostly radio?

01-00:23:10

Progulske: Radio and newspaper. Of course, by the time you got the newspapers, a lot of that was old news, in this day and age. But not like now. Oh, yes. Everybody followed it. To my knowledge, anyway. Our family did, I know. I think Don's family did, too.

Stein: And then your brother, he must've been too young.

01-00:23:32

Progulske: He was too young. He went into— Was it the Korean War? I don't know. He was in something, but he was too young.

Stein: Okay. Your family must've been relieved, I suppose.

01-00:23:44

Progulske: Yes. And boy, Don's family, all three boys went in.

Stein: Oh, wow.

01-00:23:48

Progulske: But they all came out, so that's— [they laugh]

Stein: It's very lucky.

01-00:23:53

Progulske: But let's see. Oh, the war started when I was a senior in high school, and he was seven years younger, so he was just barely in junior high.

Stein: Okay. He was quite young.

01-00:24:05

Progulske: But he did serve in the service. Was it the Korean War? I don't know. But it's after he got out of college, he went in the service, so that's all I know.

Stein: People talk about the time after Pearl Harbor as one of the most patriotic time periods in our history.

01-00:24:24

Progulske: I think so. Everybody had to make sacrifices. And everybody went to work in factories, that could. And I almost wish— I don't want to wish a big war on anybody, but I just think people nowadays don't realize that everybody has to work together; and that's not what they're doing these days. So that's the way it was. So anyway, I don't know what else to tell you.

Stein: Well, you said that nearly all of your male friends enlisted right out of high school?

01-00:25:06

Progulske: As soon as high school was over, most of them enlisted.

Stein: Did you know anyone who didn't, for various reasons?

01-00:25:15

Progulske: Not at the moment, no. I had one friend that probably didn't. He was very tall. I know he had eczema. He had a lot of health problems, and I don't think he did. But I don't think they probably would've taken him anyway.

Stein: Okay. [they laugh] But it sounds like almost the entire graduating class.

01-00:25:35

Progulske: Most of my friends did go into the service.

Stein: Wow. So it must've been a really huge change for so many reasons. But also because all of the boys went away, and now it seems like you probably just had a community that was mostly young women.

01-00:25:54

Progulske: Yes, I did— What did I do? I bowled. I belonged to a bowling team. And I can't remember what else. It so long ago. [they laugh]

Stein: One other thing that historians talk about, about the beginning of World War II is that there was *huge* amounts of migration, that people moved all over the place.

01-00:26:21

Progulske: That, I don't remember.

Stein: So there weren't people coming to West Springfield or leaving?

01-00:26:24

Progulske: Not that I knew.

Stein: Okay. I think it mostly on the West Coast?

01-00:26:29

Progulske: Yes, and if people wanted to work in factories. I don't know how many factories, in some of the middle states, there were for this.

Stein: Yeah. So you said that you, right out of high school, worked in an office job for one year?

01-00:26:44

Progulske: Yes.

Stein: Tell me about that. What was that?

01-00:26:45

Progulske: Oh, it was just mostly machines that we ran. It's the Mass Mutual Life Insurance Company, and I worked there. And then I went {inaudible}. Then I went and worked— And I don't even remember applying for a job or anything [Stein laughs] at the factory, and I know there was— It was a small factory. And I know probably there was a dozen girls, if that, that worked. And I ran a little engine lathe, and we worked from seven to three. The men worked from seven to seven. And we were given tools we needed. And we were given clothes. We were given overalls and a shirt. I don't know how many pair we had, but we must've had more than one because we wore them all the time.

Stein: Was the work dirty?

01-00:27:42

Progulske: Well, yes, I was on a machine. It wasn't filthy, but you'd use oil and stuff.

Stein: Okay, so you needed coveralls or overalls.

01-00:27:52

Progulske: Yes. Yes. So that's basically where I started going with Don.

Stein: So he was working in the factory, as well?

01-00:28:02

Progulske: Yes.

Stein: And what was the factory making?

01-00:28:06

Progulske: He said they were making shell loaders, some; but I worked on gyroscope compasses for the Navy. Now, I don't know if they were for the ships or what they were, but they were gyroscopes. And as I said, I don't think there were more than a dozen girls that worked there, that I knew. The girls didn't work at night, and they had to quit at three.

Stein: Okay. Do you know where that was?

01-00:28:34

Progulske: Yes, it was Springfield, down on {Burney?} Avenue. That factory, since then— It's still in existence, but it's moved off somewhere. I think it's in East Longmeadow or somewhere like that.

Stein: Why did the women have to stop at three?

01-00:28:51

Progulske: I don't know, but we had to stop at three.

Stein: Do you think it was to protect you?

01-00:28:56

Progulske: I don't know. Probably women weren't supposed to work as long or something, I don't know. But that's what it was.

Stein: Okay. It sounds like it must have been a pretty big change, working in a machinery factory with men around.

01-00:29:14

Progulske: Yes, but I don't remember it bothering me at all. But I knew I didn't want to do it the rest of my life. [they laugh]

Stein: Was it hard work?

01-00:29:23

Progulske: Not really, because it was a small lathe and you had small tools that you were trying to get— They'd be on a cylinder, and you had to use your— I don't know if it was knife or whatever it was that would go back and forth. So you

had to be sure you got it to the right— I had a micrometer and I had to make sure it got to the right thickness.

Stein: Okay. What is a lathe? I don't know much about factories. [laughs]

01-00:29:50

Progulske: Well, mine was little. And you put whatever you're working on on the cylinder or rod in the middle. And it's a knife type of thing that cuts. And this would go up and down, so it would do it evenly. My husband ran a milling machine, but it was much larger. It was a big machine.

Stein: So what was he making? Do you know what his role was?

01-00:30:21

Progulske: I think he said shell loaders. I don't know for sure.

Stein: Shell loaders?

01-00:30:26

Progulske: Yes.

Stein: Okay.

01-00:30:26

Progulske: Yes. Part of— But anyway, I went in nurses training and he went in the Navy V12 or whatever, some Navy program at Harvard.

Stein: Okay. When you finished high school, before you started these jobs, did you consider continuing on to college or—

01-00:30:50

Progulske: I did, but under the circumstances, I went to work.

Stein: Was that because of the war effort?

01-00:31:00

Progulske: No, I think I didn't know what I wanted to do, and going to college then was much more difficult than it is now, so it was what I did then. And then after I worked at Package Machinery for a year, I went into the Cadet Nurse Corps and was in there three years. I passed my state boards and went on. But of course, there wasn't that much help in hospitals then, so we got a lot of training, but we had to do a lot of things that probably today, they wouldn't do.

Stein: What type of things?

01-00:31:44

Progulske: Oh, prepping people, and we did probably some of the IVs and— A lot of things that they do today.

Stein: That probably doctors would take over, or maybe nurses don't do anymore, do you think?

01-00:32:01

Progulske: Oh, I think nurses do it, but they don't— Well, there wasn't that much, really. Penicillin didn't even come in until— My second year of nursing training is when they started using penicillin. But like prepping men for surgery and things like that. We only had one male nurse in the whole hospital, and he was fairly old. So we did a lot of things that probably, they wouldn't do today.

Stein: Yeah. Well, I suppose to sort of wrap up the factory time, you said that you met your husband when you were working. Was there a lot of socializing between the men and the women who worked in the factory?

01-00:32:44

Progulske: I think there was. Everybody was fairly congenial. It was a small place. I can't even remember who the women were. That's awful, but I can't. My nursing training, I do because we've always managed to keep in contact.

Stein: Oh, that's wonderful.

01-00:33:09

Progulske: Except there's only about three of us still alive; that's what's— My best friend in nursing died last year.

Stein: I'm sorry.

01-00:33:18

Progulske: And I had another good friend that died; they both died of cancer. They were both smokers. And that's the way of the world. They started classes, three classes a year, in this hospital. And they usually only had two. All the hospitals were doing this, adding extra nursing classes. So as I say, I worked at Package Machinery for a year. And there were a lot of factories around. The armory employed a lot of women, too; they had to because there weren't any men.

Stein: Right. Do you remember that being surprising or—

01-00:34:06

Progulske: Well, I think it was surprising to all of us. We'd just never done that before, women. And women never wore slacks or overalls.

Stein: Right.

01-00:34:19

Progulske: So all that really changed everything.

Stein: Yeah. Did you know anyone who was scandalized by the fact that women were working? Or was it mostly accepted?

01-00:34:31

Progulske: Among my group, it was mostly accepted. Now, I'm not saying there weren't people, but we were really pretty well accepted. Well, in those days, you had no choice. You really needed—everybody felt they had to do something. It was just that's the way it was. And everybody knew we couldn't have what we wanted to eat and all those things. And it was difficult for women to plan meals. That, I will say.

Stein: When did you get married?

01-00:35:09

Progulske: 1947.

Stein: Okay, so it was after you had finished—

01-00:35:13

Progulske: Nursing school.

Stein: —nursing school.

01-00:35:15

Progulske: And Don was going to go the University of Massachusetts, so we got married then.

Stein: Okay. So you weren't worrying about preparing the meals for your family at that point.

01-00:35:27

Progulske: Oh, no. I was in the hospital nursing school for three years. And they had good food. I don't know how they managed it.

Stein: Who knows how? [laughs] But I'm sure they were someone's priority. Training nurses is so important.

01-00:35:42

Progulske: Yes.

Stein: Yeah. Do you remember any of the Rosie the Riveter songs or posters, or even that character?

01-00:35:51

Progulske: No, I don't. My mind is blank on all that. I know there was one song about Rosie the Riveter, but I can't remember; I couldn't tell you what it was. And I know there were posters, but I probably just shut it out and didn't pay any attention to it.

Stein: Or maybe because you were already working, they didn't need to recruit you.

01-00:36:15

Progulske: Yes. But most people I knew went to work right away.

Stein: Well, I suppose you were also in a pretty unique situation, in that you came out of high school just at the time when the war had started, so you could really launch into your life by helping out and getting a job and doing that. So how did you eventually make the decision to go into the Cadet Nurse Corps?

01-00:36:48

Progulske: I don't know. [laughs] I really don't.

Stein: It just happened? [laughs]

01-00:36:52

Progulske: I knew I wanted— Oh, they had a nurse in the factory. She had a nurses station, a little—I think she must've been older. And why she worked there or not other— Or maybe she only worked part-time there; I can't— But I got talking to her. And she mentioned— I think that's when I got onto the Nurse Corps.

Stein: Was she there in case people in the factory got injured?

01-00:37:25

Progulske: Yes, I think so.

Stein: Did that happen, do you recollect?

01-00:37:28

Progulske: Well, it never happened, I don't think, when I was there. And then I applied to the hospital that she had graduated from. And that was the one in metropolitan New York City. And it was a great thing, that Cadet— We even had uniforms. But I think mine's long gone.

Stein: Oh, that's a shame.

01-00:37:52

Progulske: Well— And they showed the uniforms the other day; And we didn't have coats, but after we— The first nine months you were in training, it was called probation. And after the nine months, you got capped; you got your cap. And then they gave you a cape, a beautiful blue wool cape with red wool lining. I don't know where it came from, but it must've been expensive. And that's what we used going back and forth from the hospital to our dorm and stuff. So interestingly to me, we had twenty-one girls. It was a small class because it was a class that was put in between the other two. And there were seven Protestant girls, seven Jewish girls, and seven Catholic girls.

Stein: Wow.

01-00:38:47

Progulske: I'm sure they didn't pick it that way, but it just happened. So that was good, too because we had a good mixture of everybody.

Stein: Yeah. And what was it like moving to New York? That's a pretty big move.

01-00:39:03

Progulske: Well, we were out on the island.

Stein: So you were living on Welfare Island, as well as going to school there?

01-00:39:09

Progulske: Yes, they had a nice dorm for us. It was older, but it was well kept up. And we had to take the 79th Street Ferry across. And we went into New York a lot. I don't know, I just went along with the punches and we all— What was it, every two weeks or once a week, we could stay out till twelve-thirty.

Stein: Oh, wow.

01-00:39:35

Progulske: But we walked around the streets of New York then with no fear at all. So we went every— Except we didn't go in Central Park after dark.

Stein: Okay. So that hasn't changed.

01-00:39:47

Progulske: No. Well, it's probably not near as— It was never as bad as it is now, probably. We had one month a year off. And I graduated in June. And then I came home because we were thinking about getting married. And I came home and worked at the Wesson Maternity Hospital, where I was born.

Stein: Wesson?

01-00:40:18

Progulske: Yes, where I was born. I worked there till Don went up to Amherst, and then I did a few little nursing things, and I ended up being a nurse in the college infirmary. And I did that for a long while.

Stein: Can you tell me a little bit more about your training?

01-00:40:40

Progulske: Well, we got our basic sciences at Bellevue. So we'd take the ferry and the bus to Bellevue every— Three days a week, I think it was.

Stein: Is that on First Avenue?

01-00:40:53

Progulske: Yes. And then we would work in the hospital and have some classes in the— Well, most of our classes would be in the dorm. They had a place for classes. And we went right in and worked. We did a lot of things. I think we did a lot of things that normally, the first-year students wouldn't, because there wasn't people there to do them so we had to. But I really enjoyed it. We had to work hard, but that was all right.

Stein: Do you know why there was such a shortage of nurses?

01-00:41:37

Progulske: Oh, the war.

Stein: Did the nurses who were already working, let's say at Welfare Island, when the war started, did they go off into the military?

01-00:41:44

Progulske: Some did, but most of the nurses that were there were older nurses. You didn't see any young nurses. And our instructors were older nurses, too. And then we got our psychiatry at Bellevue, and our contagion at—which is not there anymore—{Willard Parker}, where they'd get the people with measles and mumps and polio and that sort of thing. But most of the time, it was on Welfare Island.

Stein: Was your training specific to war injuries, ever?

01-00:42:22

Progulske: No, no. It was a good basic training.

Stein: Okay. Did you ever expect, or did they expect some of the trainees to go overseas to join—

01-00:42:33

Progulske: Well, the thing is, the war ended before we even graduated. [they laugh]

Stein: So what year did you start and when did you graduate?

01-00:42:41

Progulske: '47.

Stein: You graduated in '47.

01-00:42:44

Progulske: Yes, I went in in '44 and graduated in '47.

Stein: Okay, so it ended right in the middle of your training. [laughs]

01-00:42:49

Progulske: Yes. It ended, so that was never a—I think that's when it ended. I'm not sure. I know when the war ended, but anyway—

Stein: Well, it ended in '45. And you were married in '47.

01-00:43:03

Progulske: Yes. The war was over during the middle of it, so— They continued our program. That was continued.

Stein: Right.

01-00:43:13

Progulske: Our stipend and our tuition. We didn't have to pay for anything.

Stein: The entire thing was free?

01-00:43:19

Progulske: Free.

Stein: And that was because it was a government priority?

01-00:43:22

Progulske: Yes, it was run by the Public Health Service, the national, the government, I think. Yes. When I got home, I got home and went to work at Wesson Maternity. They still needed a lot of nurses then. And then I had to go back to New York for a couple days and take my state boards. And I passed that state board; then I got reciprocity with Massachusetts. And after we were married, I still stayed at Wesson Maternity, and then when we moved up to Amherst, then I worked— I think I worked at Cooley Dick [Cooley Dickinson Hospital] for a little bit. That's a hospital in Northampton— But then I went mainly at the infirmary at the university.

Stein: Did most of your other friends in the nursing school, did most of them continue with that career?

01-00:44:27

Progulske: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, they all— Most of them stayed right in New York City. And they all— Oh, yes. Some of them went on and got their degree, college degree, too. No, we all stayed right in the area. Some are in Long Island, some are at— But they were in—

Stein: Yes. Because we do hear about a lot of women who worked during the war and then as soon as they had children, stopped working and took care of the kids. It seems like with the nursing school, you maybe got training that was more specialized or people felt—

01-00:45:04

Progulske: Well, you could get a three-to-eleven job or a night job or something, so that made a difference. But most of my classmates are dead, too. Some were in California. They just moved. They did go all over the country, some of them. Most of them, after they got married. I think they stayed in the New York area until they got married, and then they moved.

Stein: I know that Welfare Island has been the subject of a couple of movies. There's a really interesting history with the lunatic asylum and the various hospitals. What was it like during the time that you were living there?

01-00:45:51

Progulske: Well, actually, we were on one end of the island and we could walk right to the ferry. They had a home for delinquent girls on the island.

Stein: Really?

01-00:46:03

Progulske: And a couple of times, we got questioned [they laugh] if we were delinquent girls. But they had a ferry over the 59th Street— They went over the 59th Street Bridge, but they had an elevator. And the ambulances would come own every other night. They'd pick up stuff, pick up whatever they picked up in the streets of New York. And that's how we got our pay.

Stein: Oh, okay. Oh, so it was mostly indigents or—

01-00:46:33

Progulske: Yes. Yes.

Stein: Do you know, were many of them servicemen? Or were they mostly just people who had fallen on hard luck?

01-00:46:41

Progulske: Well, they had some patients that really needed— We had a lot of older people, I know, as patients. So it was a little bit of everything. But not any very wealthy patients, but it was a little bit of— you know.

Stein: Was it a public hospital?

01-00:47:00

Progulske: Oh, yes. That was it. It was part of the department of hospitals in New York, with Bellevue and Harlem and there was a whole bunch of them. I think they had a program in Harlem, too; I'm not positive. I know they had one in Bellevue.

Stein: Okay. Because nobody, I suppose— Well, did anybody live on Welfare Island full-time?

01-00:47:24

Progulske: *Now*, they do. It's changed.

Stein: Right. Now there are apartment buildings.

01-00:47:28

Progulske: Yes, it's changed to Roosevelt Island. I don't think anybody lived on there unless they were working there.

Stein: Okay. So the only way that you would find your patients was by going—

01-00:47:40

Progulske: Came down the 59th Street Bridge.

Stein: And by looking for them in New York City?

- 01-00:47:46
Progulske: Well, anybody that got hurt or anything, they took. But there were older people there that— I don't know. They must've gotten ill and that's where they sent them.
- Stein: Was it something like a hospice?
- 01-00:48:08
Progulske: No, no.
- Stein: Did they specialize in particular problems?
- 01-00:48:17
Progulske: Well, they had a TB unit. They had everything.
- Stein: Okay. Do you remember what was your favorite part or your favorite aspect of being a nurse then?
- 01-00:48:30
Progulske: No, I really don't. I didn't like the operating room. I never did. I don't know why, but I never did. And I have friend that would work anything but the operating room.
- Stein: How did you get used to seeing blood and injuries— I imagine that there must've been tough at first.
- 01-00:48:49
Progulske: It didn't bother— I don't know, I just took it as it came. I had no problem with that.
- Stein: And did you ever get people who had been in the war? Was there ever any sense—
- 01-00:49:00
Progulske: No, I don't think so. Any war person went to some other Army hospital or something.
- Stein: Okay. Now, were you part of the military?
- 01-00:49:11
Progulske: We were part— It was Public Health Service, but I think the Army had something to do with it, too. But I don't know.
- Stein: But I imagine that you must've been very proud that you taking part in that.
- 01-00:49:31
Progulske: Yes, but it was just—We worked hard, but we had a lot of friends, too; we did a lot of things. I know one time— [laughs] Another good friend of mine was {Millie Naylor?}. And very Jewish, which was fine. We went out one night to {Minnie's sisters?}, and we went to this restaurant. And it was a kosher

restaurant, of course. I knew nothing about what to do. And I ordered a corned beef sandwich and a glass of milk. [they laugh]

Stein: Did they let you eat it?

01-00:50:13

Progulske: No. So it was a fun thing, too. We met a lot of the parents and— It was fine. I worked hard, but it was fine. And I was doing something. I wasn't cut out to work as a secretary or something. That wasn't my thing.

Stein: You needed something more hands on, perhaps.

01-00:50:47

Progulske: Yes.

Stein: Yeah. Was this the same time that your husband was in California— Or your future husband, I suppose.

01-00:50:55

Progulske: No, he was in Harvard. He was in the Naval— What did they call it? It wasn't ROTC. V-12 program. So he was in that.

Stein: And then eventually, did he go to California after that?

01-00:51:11

Progulske: He went to— Well, they dropped the V-12 program after he'd been there a year and a half or so, so he was in the regular Navy. Then he went to Newport. Then he went to Sampson; then he went to someplace in California; and then eventually, Port Chicago. But he wanted to do something more than he did at Port Chicago, but it was fine. And that was right after they'd had the bad time in Port Chicago, where the ships were blown up. And he always says the captain lined them up when they first got there. If there's any problem with the blacks, it's going to be your fault.

Stein: Wow.

01-00:51:58

Progulske: Well, they were mutinizing, all of them. Which I don't blame them.

Stein: Right.

01-00:52:07

Progulske: But that made a difference. So we corresponded and all. Everybody wrote letters. You didn't telephone, those days.

Stein: Did you hear about Port Chicago in the newspapers?

01-00:52:20

Progulske: I never heard anything about Port Chicago.

Stein: Only from your husband.

01-00:52:25

Progulske: Through him. But when I went in nurses training, I didn't read the newspapers.

Stein: Oh, I'm sure you were so busy.

01-00:52:30

Progulske: We didn't do that. We would keep track of stuff, I remember, how things were going.

Stein: Do you remember VE Day?

01-00:52:44

Progulske: Ye-es. VE Day. Was that in August? Or was it VJ Day that was in August? I think it was VJ— VJ Day I remember, I think. I don't remember the— VJ Day, I was home on vacation and Don was home on leave. And we were up {at Ash Hills?}, at his folks' summer home. And we got the word and we came down to Springfield, and everybody was dancing and shooting off this and that and the other thing and sitting on the curbs. It was just a madhouse. That I remember. And that was VJ Day, because that was the *real* end.

Stein: Yeah. Yeah.

01-00:53:29

Progulske: Yes. The other one, I don't remember. And I don't know why, but I don't. I remember when Roosevelt died. Somehow the word got around then, but I don't— I was in training then, too. But other than that, I can't give you much information. [they laugh]

Stein: Well, it sounds like VJ Day was a pretty memorable time.

01-00:53:56

Progulske: Yes, it was.

Stein: You must've been so relieved.

01-00:53:59

Progulske: Yes, because it was over and—

Stein: Exactly.

01-00:54:01

Progulske: —things could get back to normal. Of course, that took a while, too.

Stein: What was the transition like? I don't think I've spoken to many people about that.

01-00:54:13

Progulske:

Well, for me, it wasn't much different. Life went on. I went back to New York and I had another year of nurses training. And Don was in the Navy and went back to California, and eventually got out. But to me, it really didn't change because we— I think we still had rationing, and I don't remember that. But it was going to take a while; you still had all these troops to take care of. Just because it stopped— I really don't remember. Which is probably wrong, but—

Stein:

Well, no, it sounds like you were— You went back to your school like before.

01-00:54:58

Progulske:

I think everybody sort of went back to what they were doing and gradually, you got the changes.

Stein:

Yeah. Do you remember people coming home, friends of yours who you hadn't seen in a long time?

01-00:55:10

Progulske:

Well, no because I was in New York and my friends would all be in Massachusetts. So I just don't remember. And when you're away from your town for a while, you don't remember.

Stein:

Yeah. When you would go out of New York City, were there servicemen everywhere?

01-00:55:31

Progulske:

Oh, yes.

Stein:

People talk about sort of like USO dances or entertaining troops.

01-00:55:35

Progulske:

Yes, we went to some of the USO things. We'd wear our uniforms and then we would go to USO dances. But I don't think any of us really— Some people dated people they met in—

Stein:

In the city?

01-00:55:54

Progulske:

No, most of them got their boyfriends after they got out. One girl did. But she'd been going with him since high school, so—

Stein:

Okay. [they laugh]

01-00:56:08

Progulske:

But mostly, we just went back to normal. Not normal, but back the way it was. And gradually, things changed.

Stein:

You mentioned the reformatory on the island.

01-00:56:24
Progulske: *You* did. Oh, the girls.

Stein: The girls.

01-00:56:26
Progulske: The girls, girls. Yes.

Stein: What was that for?

01-00:56:28
Progulske: I don't know if it was a reformatory, but it was just a home for delinquent girls, and that's all I know. It was in the middle of the island. We never went down there because we went— We hardly *ever* used the 59th Street Bridge. We all—

Stein: Take the ferry.

01-00:56:44
Progulske: —on the 79th Street Ferry, we'd go across. And it only took you three minutes.

Stein: Oh, that's great.

01-00:56:50
Progulske: And you'd go across and hit the bus or taxi or whatever you wanted.

Stein: So you weren't trapped on the island, by any means.

01-00:56:58
Progulske: No, no. No, because we'd go off for classes.

Stein: Right, at Bellevue and at the other hospitals. When you look back on this time, does— People talk so much about changes to women's roles because of some of the war work that they were doing. Is that something that rings true to you?

01-00:57:22
Progulske: Yes, I think things did change. And women wore pants or slacks, where they didn't before. I think the whole atmosphere. Women were working more then. And from then on, I think women just worked. Before then, you stayed home. So anyway. That's the way it was.

Stein: Yeah. Do you feel a part of the story of the Rosie the Riveter?

01-00:57:56
Progulske: Yes, to an extent. As I say, I only worked at it a year, but I did my thing. It was an interesting experience, I guess I should say. I enjoyed it. I don't say *enjoyed* it, but I liked— It was very— I could easily live with it, shall I say. And of course, I think I went to work on a bus. My father didn't take me, so I must've gone on the bus. And I made one bus to Springfield, and then I'd

have to change to get another bus to go to the factory— I *guess*, but I don't remember. And I know we bowled several nights a week. That's all I can remember. And another thing. You rode the bus late at night, and nobody thought anything of it. I had to walk about ten— oh, I guess a good five minutes or more, from the bus to our house. You just never thought about it.

Stein: Didn't even worry about any of the—

01-00:59:05

Progulske: You didn't worry about it, you just did it. Which you couldn't today, of course.

Stein: Right. Right. Are there other ways that you feel that this time period affected your life? Or are there other important topics that you think you want to talk about?

01-00:59:23

Progulske: Not really. My folks, my father and stepmother were on the old side to have children. So they were strict and I had to do what they said. You never would cross up your parents. Then the war, I think, changed everybody, to an extent. But that's all— you know. It's amazing to me how— When 9/11 came, people really pulled together for a while. But the book *The Greatest Generation* is so true. People really worked together— I don't think it made a difference what your economic situation was; people knew that you— That's the way it was. I'm sure there was plenty of black marketing for food; I know there was. But the majority of them didn't.

Stein: Yeah. Well, it really sounds like a different time, but a really important one.

01-01:00:35

Progulske: Yes, it was. It really was. But I think the way people worked together and everybody— The housewives had to struggle and make a meal, and you had to— People didn't go out much at night. They couldn't. I did; We bowled, so I must've— The buses must've been running, but I don't— Some of these details, I just don't remember.

Stein: Yeah. Well, we're actually almost out of this tape.

01-01:01:09

Progulske: Well, that's good.

Stein: So it might be a good time. [laughs] Thank you so much.

01-01:01:13

Progulske: Well, thank you. I don't feel I gave you much information.

Stein: No, you certainly did.

01-01:01:17

Progulske: Well, good.

Stein: You certainly did. I haven't found anyone who has talked about the nursing experience, which was a critical part of the war effort.

01-01:01:29

Progulske: Yes, it was.

Stein: And a really important way that women contributed, in a way that maybe wasn't open to men, that was unique.

01-01:01:35

Progulske: Yes. Oh, yes, I think it was a— We learned a lot in that era. But anyway, I appreciate you coming.

Stein: Well, I appreciate you offering your time to us.