

DP-32

IRVING HALPERIN

BIRTH DATE: 1904

INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 24, 1989

RUNNING TIME: 20:00

INTERVIEWER: ANDREW PHILLIPS

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: STUDIO CITY, CA

TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1989

TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: CHICK LEMONICK, 2/1996

TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

RUSSIA, 1909

AGE 5

PASSAGE ON "THE VEENDAM"

PHILLIPS: Okay. We might as well get started. I'll just put an identification on this tape here. All right. This is Andrew Phillips. I'm speaking with Irving Halperin, H-A-L-P-E-R-I-N. It will be interview 406 [DP-32]. It is the 24th May, 1989. We're beginning this interview at about 6:30. And Mr. Halperin's country of origin is--

HALPERIN: Russia.

PHILLIPS: Russia. And, uh, what year were you born?

HALPERIN: I was born in 1904.

PHILLIPS: Uh-huh. And what year did you immigrate?

HALPERIN: 1909.

PHILLIPS: Okay. Could we go back to your early experience as a child in Russia. Tell us what your father did and where you lived.

HALPERIN: We lived in a small, a *stadt* (Yiddish) like *Fiddler On The Roof*. You know that play *Fiddler On The Roof*? A *stadt* like that, right outside of Minsk, Russia. My father was a carpenter, and my grandfather was a, uh, like a contractor. He used to do all the work for the church and for the nobility around there on their homes and the churches and stuff like that. I remember as a child we were very comfortable. I was very comfortable there. I used to, most of the time I stayed, uh, we lived across the street from my grandfather. I remember they had that brick oven and in the wintertime we used to sleep on top of it because it was warm, you know. Real, like a brick oven that they have in some bakeries, they originally had there. I remember also they having like a policeman, what they called a *gendarme*. He had a big sword and uniform, and he used to, he used to play with me. I used to sit on his lap, you know, and he used to play around with me. I remember going out in the woods, and there was hazelnuts, and when they would blossom we used to make beads and hang them around like a necklace and so forth. And my mother was a very good seamstress. She had five girls working for her, and she was, she could make

any kind of clothes at all.

PHILLIPS: One minute.

HALPERIN: My father came to this country before we did. He came about a year or a year and a half before we immigrated. And, uh, we left, my mother, myself and my brother, who was about two years younger than I, we left Russia. And I remember crossing the border at night with a guard. You had to sneak across the border. That was a custom then. They had to pay the guide and used to sneak across the border. And, uh, we finally wound up in Antwerp, Belgium, where we got on the boat. I think the name of the boat was the Veendam. I remember being on the boat and we were in steerage and, you know, things were terrible there, you know. But as a child, you know how it is. I remember being up on deck and watching the dolphins jumping in the water. And then we finally, when we got to this country, we went through Ellis Island and it didn't take us too long because my father was waiting for me there and he had made all the arrangements and, uh, he picked us up, and we stayed in Bayonne, New Jersey. We lived in Bayonne, New Jersey, and I went to school there until I was in my high school. I think it was the end of my second year of high school. My father bought a farm out near Flemington, New Jersey. We went out there, and I graduated high school in Flemington, New Jersey. And, uh, after my father sold the farm we went back to the city. We lived in Jersey City. And, uh, I married my wife in 1929, right after the big crash of October 1929. And, uh, we lived in Jersey City for a while and then when the boys were growing up I finally , I

worked as a carpenter, because I learned my trade, at the same time I was working as a carpenter I was going to N.Y.U. at night, and I got a degree in commercial science, what we call a, uh, business administration today, it was the same thing. But I didn't like it. I didn't like sitting in an office. I liked to work outdoors. I enjoyed it, and I was pretty good at it. And, uh, then I took a civil service job around 1940 or '39, and went to work for the State of New Jersey and the State Unemployment Insurance Office. and I worked there until 1947. My wife had asthma very bad, and the doctor told her to get out of the east. So we came out here in 1947.

PHILLIPS: Okay. That's like a summary of your life. I'd like to just go back and pick up a few points as you go through.

HALPERIN: Yes. Yeah.

PHILLIPS: I know you left Russia when you were very young, but can you give us a sense of the atmosphere at your home in the country and in the village at the time.

HALPERIN: Uh, well, we didn't have any problems to speak of, as far as that goes, except we're always looking for a better life. But as far as anti-Semitism, there wasn't much around at that time. My grandfather was well-connected with the church people and the nobility there, the Count or whatever they call him there. And we got along pretty good as far as I remember. There was no problem that would force us to leave there. The

main reason we left is because we wanted to have more freedom and a better economic life.

PHILLIPS: How did you hear about the United States? I mean, what was it that encouraged you to leave?

HALPERIN: Well, as a child, five years old, I didn't have no conception. My parents made the decision.

PHILLIPS: But, subsequently, did they ever tell you why?

HALPERIN: No. I mean, all my family came the same way. I had uncles here the same way. You know, this was the land where there was gold on the ground. (He laughs.) You know, they say.

PHILLIPS: When you, when you--

HALPERIN: Don't forget that in Russia no matter how good it was there was always the cloud over you of something might explode. You always had that fear regardless. So, uh, that was one of the reasons too. Because after we were here for a while we took, my grandparents came over and the rest of family.

PHILLIPS: Can you remember actually sailing to the United States? Do you remember that as a child?

HALPERIN: I remember being on the boat. I told you. I was in steerage, and going up on deck and, uh, I used to run around as a kid, you know. No matter how bad things were, like an adult would feel different about it. But if you know anything about steerage, it was the bottom of the boat, the cheapest part, and the cost was very little, as I understand, at that time. And the food was terrible. Most of the people brought a lot of their own food there, you know. And you had all kinds of smells and everything. Herring, or salami, and stuff like that was all around the place.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember arriving in the United States?

HALPERIN: Yeah. I remember going to Ellis Island. I remember going to all the, uh, there was all like wire fence, fenced off sections, you know, where you went through. And, uh, I just, I remember going through there. I don't know what they did or anything. (He laughs.)

PHILLIPS: Do you remember seeing Manhattan for the first time?

HALPERIN: I didn't have a chance to look at Manhattan, because my father picked us up and took us right over to New Jersey.

PHILLIPS: And what was it like being with these children that

didn't speak your language?

HALPERIN: You know, that's the wonderful thing. I can't realize today how I learned English. Because there was no bi-lingual education like they have today and we used to play with the kids, you know. And I don't know, somehow you absorb the language, running Around. And they threw me right into school and I didn't have any problems. It's probably part of our culture, the parents want, all our parents that came through wanted the children to have an education, so they helped in whatever way they could, even though they didn't speak English very well, you know, they weren't able to until quite a bit later because it took them longer to absorb it. But playing in the street with all the children, I remember it was no problem at all, because there were so many immigrant children around all the time with the people who, with the children who were already born there.

PHILLIPS: Can you give me a little bit of background about your schooling, what it was like as a young kid being in school?

HALPERIN: I enjoyed school very much. I was a, what do they call it, a omnivorous reader. I read all the time, every book in the library. I used to enjoy reading, I remember going to public school. I used to enjoy reading historical novels. You know, there was a writer called G.A. Henty, H-E-N-T-Y, who wrote historical novels, you know, with fiction in between, but there's a lot of history in it, like the War of Roses in Europe and the 30 Years War and the war between the Swedes and the Russians, and so forth.

I knew so much history, I used to drive the teacher crazy in school. In fact, I had one teacher, her name was Mrs, Reilly. She wanted to get rid of me, so she skipped me, you know what I mean, she skipped me a grade, to get rid of me. So what happened , she was put into my class again. She skipped me again. I saved a whole year in public school. (He laughs.) I graduated public school when I was twelve years old. I got out of high school at sixteen.

PHILLIPS: What did you do then?

HALPERIN: When I got of high school, I was sixteen years old. Believe it or not, I got a job in the post office as a railway mail clerk. They don't have railway mail clerks today. At that time they had railway mail clerks. We lived out on the farm there, and they sent me to work in Philadelphia as a sixteen year old kid. I was supposedly eighteen. But somehow my father made a mistake, and don't tell anybody, mad a mistake on my citizen papers and made me two years older so I, you know. That was the only proof I had. I had no birth certificate. So I was working, at sixteen I was a railway mail clerk in Philadelphia. Then I got a transfer to New York to be closer to the family. And I worked about two years there. And then I decided I was inside all the time and dust, and I didn't like it. So, my father was a builder. He became a builder. He built homes, apartments, and so forth.

PHILLIPS: You say, you were a railroad clerk. Is that what you

said?

HALPERIN: Railway mail clerk.

PHILLIPS: Railway mail clerk.

HALPERIN: Yeah, yeah. We worked mostly in a, some people worked on the trains, but I worked in the terminals. I worked in the Pennsylvania Terminal in New York, you know, where the Pennsylvania station is. Is it still there?

PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HALPERIN: Yeah? I used to work down below there where the trains came in. I was a, it was a very dusty job, you know, and very bad for your lungs and so forth. It's dust all the time. So I went to work for my father. I joined the union, became a union member. And then when I was working there I was about, uh, oh, I'd say twenty-three, twenty-three years old. I, uh, decided to go to college. You know, everybody says, "You got to go to college, you got to go to college." So I used to, I went, I registered at N.Y.U. down at Washington Square. And I went five nights a week, four hours a night, for four years, and got a degree in

accounting, and stuff like that. But I didn't care for it. I didn't like it after I was finished with it. I just did it to satisfy my parents. I love working with my hands. (He laughs.) You know, I had a professor in college used to say, "You know, what's an accountant? He puts down things after it happens. He doesn't see how it happens." He says, "I'd like to do something that I can see happen." I like to do something with my hands. When I finish it, there. You see that? I put that up there, I built it. I put those stairs up there, I put that window in there, I hung that door up there. I put the lock on that door and so forth. I enjoyed it. In fact, because I'm eighty-five years old, that's why I'm in good health today because of, you know, a lot of physical work was involved. Well, anyway, where was I? So I became that, and I was doing, in fact, I was telling older men how to do the work. They used to call me in on special jobs because as an apprentice in a union you have to go to school and learn things. These old timers never had the schooling, education. They didn't know how to frame a roof, how to use a square and all the mathematics involved, you know, to lay it out. And then I got married.

PHILLIPS: Tell me, it sounds like you were proud to be in the

union.

HALPERIN: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Listen, I get a pension from the union today. I get a pension from the union today. And, uh, without the pension it wouldn't be so hard. Of course, I made a couple of bucks selling property here, you know, but the main thing is you have that steady income, you know.

PHILLIPS: Tell me about, about the Depression years.

HALPERIN: Oh, the Depression was bad. For a while there, really bad, I think things got so bad, and I couldn't get any work or anything. For about three months I had to go on welfare, what they, at the time, on welfare, you know. I remember having to go and get shoes for the kids. They had special places, you get a shoe, and you get a certificate. And, uh, you get a certain, in fact, I worked on the WPA during the Depression as a carpenter. And we used to, we got, uh, as long as I was able to work there, we got pretty good money. We got union wages. We only worked so many hours but, you know, we got union wages. But it helped a little bit. And then, uh, then I got that job with the State afterwards which, during the Depression, if you had a job like that you were sitting high on the hog, you know. What was it, it was, what, I began there with about thirty-five or forty dollars a week at that time. Which wasn't bad, you know, because things were cheap. And, uh, when I finished there I was making about fifty-five or sixty dollars a week. I hated to give it up, because it was a good

job. (He laughs.) I was sent out to, uh, I was what you'd call a senior employment interviewer. But I was able to train people, you know, break them in on the procedures. And, uh, whenever one of the offices in the State had a problem and the manager couldn't handle it and they had to get, you know, transfer him over, they used to send me in to take over the office, the whole office, to straighten it out. It would take me two or three months sometimes. That was I met a lot of interesting people. I remember once I went to Fort Lee, You know where Fort Lee is in New Jersey? I was, Palisades Park was the office. And they used to go out, I also used to go out and interview employers to get a, you know, to see if they need any help, to get a list of jobs that they had open so the people who would come into out office could be sent out there. One of the men I went to interview was the head of Consolidated Films. I forgot his name. He owned Republic Pictures, the studio which is right in back of us here. Republic Studios, where Gene Autry and all those guys there with the movies. I remember being in his office, a hell of a nice guy, real down to earth. And he had all these, uh, trophies on the wall, you know. Big game trophies, tiger skin rugs on the floor and everything. We'd sit there for two hours and talk to him. They were very interesting people I met there.

PHILLIPS: Okay. I'm just getting a sense, I mean, the main part of what I'm interested in is the Ellis Island end of it.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: Is there anything else that comes to mind about, because you were so young.

HALPERIN: Yeah. I was five years old, you know. You just, it's like a dream going through there, you know. How much can a five year old kid (?), you know. I remember going through there but, uh, because my father, being here already, it made it a lot easier for us.

PHILLIPS: Why did your father come first? Did he--

HALPERIN: Well, that was the custom then. My father came first so he could see what, uh, you know, he had a brother here and it could be set up for a place to live and to get a job, what kind of work could be done and so forth. So to bring the whole family over without anything at all, you know, would be, some people did that too, but this way it was a lot easier, much easier. And nearly everybody did that. First the husband came over and then, sometimes the husband came over and forgot about the wife too, you know, if you read anything about the history of immigration. (Break in tape.)

PHILLIPS: That's it, we're going to finish the interview with Mr. Halperin. Interview Number 406 [DP-32].

DP-32/HALPERIN