

DP-37

LEONA GRUBSTEIN TURKIN

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THE UKRAINE, 1922

AGE 3

PASSAGE ON "THE OLYMPIC"

PHILLIPS: This is Andrew Phillips and I'm with Leona Turkin, whose maiden name is, how do you pronounce it?

TURKIN: Grubstein.

PHILLIPS: G-R-U-B-S-T-E-I-N.

TURKIN: Grubstein. Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: Yes. And it's the 28th of May 1989, Sunday. We're beginning this interview at about 11:10. Now, if we could start, Mrs. Turkin, could you tell me your name, where you're from originally, and what date you immigrated?

TURKIN: All right. My name is Leona Turkin. My maiden name was Grubstein. We're from Russia, a part in the Ukraine that I understand now may be Leningrad. It was called Stkonstinoff

[PH]. We came here in 1922.

PHILLIPS: What year were you born?

TURKIN: In 1919.

PHILLIPS: Okay. Could you start by telling us what your father did for a living. What was his background?

TURKIN: Can I start by telling you about my grandfather, because that was even more interesting. My grandfather on my father's side was an overseer for a Russian lord. And he had three children. He wanted them to be educated, but sending children to school if you were Jewish was very hard to do. So he used to get a melamud [ph] or a teacher, who came to live in the house with them, and taught the children. So when they learned all that teacher had to teach them, they would get a new one. And my father ended up speaking six languages. In Europe he was a, he owned a mill and a tannery. He was married for twenty years to a very sick woman, had no children. When she died, he married my mother who was thirty-six. He was fifty. My mother had kind of an interesting background too. Her parents owned a general store in this town. I understand that one of the sisters sold, they travelled around buying merchandise for the store, and it was evidently quite a good-sized store. My mother had, there were six children in her family. The oldest, no, the second

oldest, and the youngest, were pharmacists, or learned to be pharmacists in Russia. That meant that they were able to go to the gymnasias to get an education. They left, they were the first to immigrate. My grandmother had a, no, I think it was my grandfather's sister, lived in Pittsburgh. They had immigrated many years before. When the Cossacks came and the, they were, both sons were to be conscripted into the army. My grandfather sent the oldest son, who went to the University of Pennsylvania, hardly able to talk English, and was able to finish work to become a pharmacist.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember what year that was?

TURKIN: 1905. Um, his younger brother was the next one that the army wanted. So I understand he hid out in various places before they were able to get him to America. He came to America maybe five to ten years later. That part of the story I'm not sure of. Both of them, he had already finished his education, and it was just a matter of learning to speak English before he could practice his profession. Many years later, the Russian Revolution happened. And these two uncles, who had done very well, in fact the older uncle owned one of the largest drug stores in Pittsburgh at that time, put together a quarter of a million dollars, which just blows my mind because where they got that kind of money I don't know. But that was the story. And

brought out twenty-three people from Europe. Some of them had to, including us, some of them had to live in Poland until we could get a visa to come here. But, uh, most of us came to America, to Pittsburgh. That's where our story is a little different.

PHILLIPS: Before you get onto that part of it, could you take us back to the time that you, your parents, your grandparents, were in Russia. Could you trace out some sense, some feeling of what it was like living in that country. You were very young, of course, but you might be able to recall stories your parents told you.

TURKIN: Uh-huh. My grandmother lived with us, so there were lots of stories. My grandmother, my grandfather died before, had been gone for many years, and my grandmother was a businesswoman and ran this store with the help of her son and the two daughters. And, uh, I think they lived a relatively comfortable life for people in Russia at that time. They had maids and the children were fairly well-educated. They were very respected in that town. I later, many, many years later, ran into somebody who knew them, from Russia, and helped me be able to go to college.

PHILLIPS: Excuse me. I think you said the name of the town, but it's . . .

TURKIN: It's Stkonstinoff.

PHILLIPS: Do you know how to spell that?

TURKIN: Yes. It's, in fact, I have a picture with the name on it. A picture of my aunt. Yes, here it is. It's a picture of my grandmother and my aunt with the name of the town written on it. It's S-T-K-O-N-S-T, oh S-T-I-N-O-F-F. Stkonstinoff. One of my cousins, who has been to Russia, says that it's now part of Leningrad, and I've always thought it was near Kiev, but it was in the Ukraine.

PHILLIPS: So, um, your father owned a tannery.

TURKIN: Uh-huh. And a mill.

PHILLIPS: What sort of a mill?

TURKIN: Where they ground flour. My father was very well educated. He spoke six language and wrote the languages because, you know, his background. However, he was very, very, very religious. And when the uncles sent for our family he was very perturbed because it meant he was going to have to work on Saturday, which was impossible, as far as he was concerned. so when we went to Poland waiting for our visa, he, because of his Jewish education, he decided that he would be a schochet. Now, a schochet is somebody who helps kill chickens that have to be

killed in a ritualistic way. So he studied to do that in Poland. When we came to this country . . .

PHILLIPS: I'm sorry. Could you spell that for us also?

TURKIN: Uh, S-C-H-O-I-C-H-E-T.

PHILLIPS: We can check that.

TURKIN: Yeah. Uh, according to Jewish law of things being kosher, the idea is that animals are not to be killed in a way that causes them pain. And, uh, this was the thing he did. The thing he wanted to do was to be a chazan, which is a person who sings liturgy in a synagogue. But, unfortunately, he had a very low voice like mine, and he was never able to do that. He ended up teaching children and being a schoichet, and never making a lot of money, but both of us went to college.

PHILLIPS: Tell us about any of your memories back in Russia. You were very young, of course.

TURKIN: I was just three. I can't think of anything back in Russia. They tell a story that when I was an infant, the cossacks were coming into town, and there was going to be a pogrom, and the family was hiding in this house. I think my parents and my grandparents, all of them lived in this rather nice house, and it had been in the family for generations. And there was some

way, there was like a trap door that led into the attic. And I started to cry, and they were so frightened that they would all be killed, and so they went up into the attic and pulled like a ladder that went up into the ceiling. And the Cossacks came, and they had managed to calm me down before they got there. And they feel, they felt that I, as a baby, saved the family, because they had had to hide in a less conspicuous place when the Cossacks came. The other story that's interesting is that when they left, having had a store, they brought a lot of merchandise and things with them because they were going to be in Poland for a couple of years. It was all put into a big wagon, and they got a person whom they had known, who is not Jewish, but a person whom they had known, to take them across to Poland where we were going to stay. And the story was that I started to cry and I was very tired and so this, the driver said to my parents, "Let me go. There's a farmyard. Let me go ask the man if you can sleep in his barn." And so he did, and the man allowed that. And he said, "Now I will go." He got us out with some of our things, but he said, "Now, I will go take care of the horses." And drove off with lots and lots of things. And, of course, we could do nothing about that. That's the other story my grandmother told.

PHILLIPS: So tell me, then, about settling down in the United States,

in . . .

TURKIN: Well, do you want to hear my Ellis Island story?

PHILLIPS: Yes, yes.

TURKIN: My Ellis Island story. When we came across on the Olympic in 1922, I think it was November. My mother was so excited, because they had sighted the Statue of Liberty. And so she asked, she told my father, she put us to bed. My mother was an infant in arms. He was born in Poland. And she put us to bed, and she said, "Let's, let me go look at the Statue of Liberty and I'll come back, and then you go look at it." Well, my father, too, was so excited that he couldn't wait. So he wrapped us in blankets and took us up on deck, and we looked at the Statue of Liberty. The next day they got into Ellis Island and they went through the inspection, and my brother was burning up with fever. He was a child in arms who was being nursed. They took him from my mother, and she had no idea what was going to happen. She was very fearful that they might send him back. She spent three terrible, terrible days, because she couldn't find anyone who could explain to her what they were doing with her child, but they kept us on Ellis Island, and three days later they brought my brother back well. And she was so overcome with joy she made a pact with God, and she said,

"Someday I hope this child will do something wonderful for this country." Well, during World War Two, my brother was a doctor stationed at the Port of New York. ( she is moved )  
Unfortunately, my mother never lived to see that.

PHILLIPS: And your brother was, in fact, helping other people entering the United States.

TURKIN: Yeah. Uh-huh. My brother became a pediatrician. He was very involved with the very early days of learning disabilities. He was really a very remarkable man, but he died at fifty.

PHILLIPS: Tell me about going to school in America.

TURKIN: That was interesting. Oh, I haven't told you about how we got to Ann Arbor, because my father became the first rabbi in Ann Arbor. When we got to, when we got to Pittsburgh, my father wanted to practice his new trade, because that would be the only way he would have here of making a living without working on Saturdays. They had a union of these schoichtim. And they would not permit my father in the union in Pittsburgh. So that meant we had to move away from my mother's family, who had brought us here, and were all, I understand, lived like next door to each other in this area where my uncles had brought us. When my father was talking to these people, they said, "I just got a letter from a little town outside of Detroit called Ann

Arbor, and there are some very religious families in Ann Arbor and Grand Rapids, and they are looking for a man who could come there. They will give you a house and a salary. They want you to conduct services, they want you to be a schoicet, to be a teacher for their children, to teach Hebrew." And my father loved the idea, so we moved to Ann Arbor, and he became the first rabbi in Ann Arbor. They gave us a little house.

PHILLIPS: What year was that?

TURKIN: It was just when we came, probably 1923. I was three years old, and I spoke Yiddish and I spoke Russian, but I didn't speak English. So the Ann Arbor school system put me in kindergarten, and I stayed there until I learned the language and went into first grade with the other children my age. But I spent a lot of time in kindergarten learning the language. As it turned out, I was the first one in my family to really speak English. My mother had a little difficulty with the people in the community. My mother was one of the early, early liberated women and they wanted her to, they wanted her to cut off her hair and wear a wig, which was part of the very orthodox rituals. They wanted her to go to a, something called a mikveh [ph]. It's a special bath that a woman takes after she menstruates. And they were very, very horrified with something terrible my mother did. She became very friendly with a woman

next door who was not Jewish. She was a goy. And the people in the community were very upset with my mother for doing this, but my mother was learning English from this woman. The woman was German, so they could speak to each other. You know, the German sounded enough like Yiddish, and they would peel potatoes or clean house or do gardening, and constantly the other woman was teaching her English. So after two years, my family moved to Detroit, and my father worked for some butchers where he was a Schoichet and he, he also used to teach children to be bar mitzvah. And when I was ten, I used to write their bar mitzvah speeches because my father's English, although his Hebrew was wonderful, his English was not good enough to help them. So I wrote bar mitzvah speeches. I now go to the synagogue, and I hear boys being, or girls being bar mitzvah, and I still know the maftir by heart because I heard it so many times as I was growing up. And I think I'm still doing what my father was doing, because I now work with children with learning problems on a one-to-one basis.

PHILLIPS: Can you recite a little bit of that for us?

TURKIN: Uh, let's see. When I need it, it isn't there. When I hear it, uh, when I hear it, you know, I say it to myself along with the boys.

PHILLIPS: Can you continue telling us a little bit about your own schooldays?

TURKIN: Uh, we moved to Detroit. We moved in an area that was supposed to have turned to become Jewish so that my father would have earned a fairly good living, but it never did. So he never really earned much money. My mother was a marvelous, marvelous manager. She sold, she was very, very warm person. My parents had not had children. They were thirty-seven and fifty when they married. And everybody thought of my father as my grandfather because he had a little beard, a little goatee beard when nobody had a beard. My mother was a very warm, outgoing person who loved children. My brother and I both. My brother grew up to be a pediatrician, I grew up to be a teacher. People came to our house because my mother was so warm and loving. I went to the regular schools. I had always wanted to be a teacher. My brother always wanted to be a doctor. And we never knew how we would be able to do it, but we did it. We, you know, worked. And, uh, worked our way through school. And we all graduated from Wayne University. In fact my children, my sister-in-law, my brother, I, my first husband, all graduated from Wayne State University.

PHILLIPS: Can you perhaps talk a little bit more, if there's anything else you can tell us, about how your family was accepted into those

communities when they first arrived.

TURKIN: It was very difficult. There was always the language problem. I had the additional problem that I was different because my family was so Orthodox. And my mother, my family would not ride on the Sabbath. They used to have somebody come in and turn off the gas, turn off the lights. I remember my brother telling horrible stories about being beat up by an Italian family who lived nearby because he was Jewish and they didn't understand. My brother was a very sickly child, and he ended up with rheumatic fever. And he couldn't be a regular boy. He was a very studious kind of person, read a lot. In those days if you had rheumatic fever, you weren't allowed to ride a bike or play baseball or do all the things boys usually do. So I think his life was much harder than mine growing up.

PHILLIPS: Any other memories of childhood in these places?

TURKIN: Um, I always wanted to write. I was editor of the high school paper. I won an essay contest when I was ten. I was very proud of myself. I always did very well in school. When I graduated from the university, I was in children's literature, which was being taught as a separate subject. And I graduate third in my group because you were placed in a job according to where you were on this list. So I was a very studious, hard-working

person. My brother was very different than I. He had a photographic memory, and he was brilliant. I grew up never thinking I was too smart, because my brother was so much smarter, and to my father being brilliant was so very important. He was so proud of him because he was such a brilliant, brilliant person. But I think I became more outgoing. I was friendlier, I was warmer than my brother, but he was really a very remarkable man.

PHILLIPS: You yourself went on to become a teacher.

TURKIN: Uh-huh. I taught, I loved it from the very first day. It was the most wonderful thing. I could do, I just loved turning children on. I did very well during my student teaching. My supervisor used to say if she walked into a school and the children were very turned on about literature, she would know that I was there. And I loved doing it. I ended up in, my brother became the first doctor in Oak Park, Michigan, which was the first suburb. And we, I had gotten a divorce at that time, and I had two children to raise. So I came back to, we had lived in Phoenix, I came back to Detroit and I taught in the most wonderful school district. There were a lot of Jewish families on the way up. There was nothing too much for educating their children. There was all the money you wanted, all the materials you wanted. The teachers, it was a very small

school district. The teachers were very involved in curriculum, in committees. During those years when I was raising my children, I was home when they were home. And I loved what I did. I taught Sunday school. I trained student teachers for the university. Then when I, when I, I taught in this wonderful district, that I was grade level chairman for first grade and second grade. And then I got a wonderful opportunity to start a program for gifted children. It was one of the first in the state. And I also started a parents group because districts were not as attuned to the needs for the gifted as they were for the ones who had learning problems, and it was really the same thing. One had learning problems, the other had social problems. So I was given the job of starting a gifted program. And many of these gifted children, I still keep contact with. One of them is in Canada now doing research in diabetes. She has her own laboratory, paid for by the Canadian government. One of my former, many of my former students are, the girls are mechanical engineers and doctors and lawyers and, in fact, when they had their tenth year reunion, they invited my husband and me to come as their guest, and it was so exciting seeing these kids that I had helped train, and what they had achieved. The young woman who had invited me said that was the best part of the reunion for her, because when she said, "Mrs. Turkin is here," everybody was so thrilled. But it's been a marvelous,

marvelous thing for me, teaching. I loved it.

PHILLIPS: You still teach.

TURKIN: Yes. I still teach. I've retired three times. First because my husband's health. We moved to California. But, uh, I became an educational therapist. I work with children that have severe learning problems. And, uh, my Master's degree was in educational psychology, and because of my brother's interest, I was always concerned. In fact, when I was raising my children and money was so tight, I did a lot of tutoring out of my head. And then when I went back and got a Master's degree, I found out I was doing everything instinctively right because I just instinctively knew that was the way to do it. One of the professors wanted me to go for a PhD program, but I never did that.

PHILLIPS: Well, anything else you should tell me?

TURKIN: No, I, uh, oh, yes. There is an important thing. Since my parents have died, all of our parents, six children who were my mother's family, are all gone. The cousins have become very, very friendly. Some of them lived in, um, some of them lived in Florida, some of them lived in California. I've re-discovered them since we've been in California. In fact, the children of the two original uncles are in California, and we see them all

the time. And we've formed very close friendships. We talk a lot about how our parents would be so thrilled to see how close and friendly we have become, and it's been a wonderful thing to happen to us.

PHILLIPS: Okay. If there's nothing else, we'll wrap it up.

TURKIN: Thank you.

PHILLIPS: All right. That brings to a close interview number 411 [DP-37].