

DP-008

LILLIAN KAIZ

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PHILLIPS: It's the 26th of March. This is Andrew Phillips. I'm speaking with Mrs. Lillian Kaiz, K-A-I-Z, interview number 382 [DP-008], in Chicago. And it's about, coming on eleven thirty. They like all of this information. Let me start, Mrs. Kaiz, can you tell us what year you were born in, and what year you immigrated.

KAIZ: I was born in 1913. I think I arrived in the States in 1921. The reason I, I'm quite sure we arrived in 1921 because that was the last year that you became a

natural citizen by virtue of your husband or your father being an American citizen. And we automatically became citizens of the United States when we arrived. I think that was 1921. So that, and I was born 1913 so that would make me, automatically, I had my first, eighth year, my first birthday party, at eight years, here in the States. In other words, we didn't celebrate birthday parties in Russia. I remember growing up, but who knows what. But here I had my first birthday party and my first doll.

PHILLIPS: Where were you born in Russia?

KAIZ: Um, near the Kiev area, a little town called Rizhon. I don't know that, that, it's a speck, I'm sure.

PHILLIPS: Do you know how to spell it?

KAIZ: Oh, as close as I could get to it would be R-I-Z-H-O-N, but I don't think that that's . . .

PHILLIPS: Can you give us some of your early memories in Russia before, this was pre-Revolution.

KAIZ: No, this was, yeah, I was born pre-Revolution, but it

was during the Revolution that we came here.

PHILLIPS: Can you give us some idea of what it was like?

KAIZ: Well, my first memory, I had some nasty memories. My first memory is, I must have been about four or five years old, and there was probably a Communist, or a revolutionary takeover. And there was a parade in the little village that we were in. And my mother had made me a beautiful red dress, and I was in the parade on a wagon. So I think that's the first historical moment that impresses me.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember if she made the red dress particularly for political reasons, just as a matter of interest?

KAIZ: I think she made it because she knew it was coming up and, yes, she made it red for that reason. Why, I cannot tell you, but I remember being very proud to wear this red dress and be on this wagon and be in this parade. Maybe I was four or five years old, I really don't know. I have no idea. But after that, we are Jewish, the pogroms, which you are familiar with, became an everyday situation. Any number of

times we, we were in, now I mentioned we, Rizhon. We were in a village outside of Rizhon which was about twenty miles away from Rizhon. And any number of times our whole family had to escape our home and run to Rizhon. Eventually my grandfather, oh, I should go back. My father, uh, immigrated to the United States when I was about eight months old or twelve months old, thereabouts. And, um, my mother and family were supposed to follow. And it took another eight years before we got there, or seven. We lived with my grandfather and grandmother and my mother, who was more or less the head of the household. There was also, uh, two uncles and an aunt still remaining in the home. One day my, uh, Cossacks, so I know I was sick in bed, I'm going backwards and forwards.

PHILLIPS: That's all right.

KAIZ: But there was no one home but my grandfather, who was ill, my grandmother and my brother, who was two years older than I, still is, and I was sick, too. At about nine o'clock, it seemed like the middle of the night to me. I was quite young. Some Cossacks came

and demanded money, whatever money there was, from my grandfather. He didn't really, they first killed him. They shot him. And, um, I cried out, and somebody punched me in the jaw. And then they made my grandmother come up with the money, which was buried, incidentally, in the backyard of the house. And they went through every spot in the place and frightened, need I tell you. And they did get the money. But that, of course, was the incident that I remember very, very, to this day, very clear.

PHILLIPS: Do you know why the Cossacks attacked your house, other than to rob you?

KAIZ: I think, I think, no. We never did find out, but it would seem to me my grandfather was a fairly affluent Jewish man in this little village. He ran a mill.

PHILLIPS: What kind of a mill?

KAIZ: Um, flour mill. As a matter of fact, if you go over, you can't, we're connected, I did a little bit of a sketch showing where the house is and the mill in connection. You see the windows towards the front, that would be the mill. And there's a bridge and

then there's a house. So that's something of it, anyway. Um, I don't know why that would be. Why would they come and kill him first and then ask for the money.

PHILLIPS: Was there anti-Semitism in the village?

KAIZ: Oh, sure.

PHILLIPS: In the region?

KAIZ: Oh, sure, definitely.

PHILLIPS: How did you, how did you experience it?

KAIZ: I was too young to know. I mean . . .

PHILLIPS: Did they tell you stories about it, your parents?

KAIZ: Not too much, except that, uh, really and truly they didn't. But the Cossacks were anti-Semitic. That was definitely known. Um, the village itself, no. We didn't have any trouble with neighbors, but there were no close neighbors. After this we moved to this little town Rizhon. And while we lived there, there was constant upheaval, because different armies would be going through, and all of a sudden we all had to

desert our little town and run out and hide in the woods, which happened any number of times. I had an incident where I was running with my brother and family and uncles and, being the youngest in the family, my foot got stuck in the mud and they almost left me there and, because nobody wanted to be caught in the road. Somehow they pulled me out. The shoe remained. And then, as we were hiding, I cried out. I suppose I wanted my shoe or whatever, and somebody said, "We're going to kill her if she doesn't shut up." I remember things like that. But it was bad. It really was.

PHILLIPS: You must have been terrified as a little girl in those circumstances.

KAIZ: I've learned something. It's taken me a long time to learn something. When things happen on a regular basis, sure you're frightened all the time, but not as frightened as if that had never happened before. You know, I had already been exposed to so many bad experiences that I was frightened to death. Poor little me, they were going to leave me alone, but then you went right on. You didn't stop and think,

"Oh my, what am I going to do now?" You had to go on, and you did.

PHILLIPS: These marauding armies, these were from different . . .

KAIZ: Different countries, yes. But as they would pass our little village, we would almost get like a, uh, signal or some sort of information that this is happening and we would desert the city. That happened at least three times in my memory.

PHILLIPS: Now, your father . . .

KAIZ: Was not there.

PHILLIPS: He'd already immigrated to the United States.

KAIZ: Uh-huh, before all this happened.

PHILLIPS: Why had he done that?

KAIZ: I imagine, again, I imagine, I don't know this for a fact, he had gone here perhaps to find a better, easier way of life, and then he was going to bring his family here.

PHILLIPS: Had he, had people gone before him from your family?

KAIZ: Uh, actually there was an uncle that married into our family. Um, who had been here first. Came back and married an aunt of mine. And they came back to the States. And then my father and two of my mother's sisters left for the States, and then the war broke out.

PHILLIPS: You're talking, which war? The first World War.

KAIZ: The first one, yeah. Definitely the first.

PHILLIPS: Give us a little bit more of a sense of Russia, of this region, if you can, perhaps, digging into the stories your parents might have told you, even afterwards, about what life was like back then for you and your family. I mean, what did you, how was, was there enough food to eat? Were you warm enough?

KAIZ: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. As I said, my grandfather was in a fairly good position and we had this, it was a clay house, but it was a nice house with, at that time they had ovens to do their cooking and baking in, and above the oven was a loft where some of us slept. They had their little garden and they had servants

quarters there, so there must have been, it must have been pretty good. But we were near forests. All I can really remember is the upheaval of the war, an incident where, again, some Cossacks were coming, and my grandmother being very worried about the young women in the family and the young men, shot them all out the back window. Everybody disappeared and, uh, gee, I think I'm getting two incidents mixed up. But I remember running away, too. So that had to be, I think, after my grandfather was killed. And I was climbing, there was a big mountain, a sand kind of mountain, dunes of some sort, where the most, the greater part of the village was peopled. And, um, I remember running up there, being run over by a horse's hoof. Climbing up to whatever home it was, and crying out a couple of times, and somebody said, "I think I hear a child crying," and somebody else said, "No, it's a dog." And eventually they took me in and my family found me there the next morning. Uh, so mostly really my memories are of a lot of upheaval and running away and because this, I seem to have been born about that time.

PHILLIPS: So how did you go about leaving those circumstances

for America?

KAIZ: Oh, well, Dad was here, and my aunts were here, and they tried to arrange passage for us. Now, we were in the heart of Russia and we had to get to Warsaw, I believe, to eventually embark on whatever ship that is. Uh, what was arranged was maybe ten, twelve wagons. I can't believe this actually happened, and I haven't thought of that at all. They packed food, they packed whatever they could take along, and there were, I don't know exactly how many families but at least, I would say, twelve families that, uh, went by wagon, mostly by night so they wouldn't have any trouble, till they arrived in Poland to go over the, uh, dividing line, what is that?

PHILLIPS: The border.

KAIZ: The border. Thank you. You know, you're talking to a woman who's seventy-six years old. I can't remember that much.

PHILLIPS: That's all right.

KAIZ: Uh, we melted snow for water. We camped at night, we ate our meals. Eventually we arrived there and, uh,

spent about a year in Warsaw till the papers were cleared and everything was set up for us to go. At one time they took Mom away from us there, too. My mother and my grandmother were arrested, and the three of us were alone. We didn't know what had happened or why, but evidently there was something that wasn't right. See, I was quite young, really and, um, details did not seem to come over to me. Actually, they were covered up a lot. So, uh, I don't know why they were taken, but they were gone for about three days and they came back. And eventually we went from there to somewhere, I guess to Berlin, and embarked on the boat, and came to the States. Um, I'm trying to remember, there was another incident that was of some interest. As I was telling you about Poland it crossed over and I, I can't recall it.

PHILLIPS: Maybe we'll get back to that.

KAIZ: It's not important.

PHILLIPS: Tell us about the actual trip across to the United States. Can you tell us, do you remember that? You were very young, again, of course.

KAIZ: I was deathly sick all the way. Um, somewhere along the line I think it must have been probably from Warsaw into Germany, but anyway a train hit my hand, a train door hit my hand, and I had a very bad situation there. I remember that all my mother's jewels and furs were either taken or she sold them, and so when we got on the boat and I saw some women dressed beautifully I regretted that my mother didn't have her things any more. I was very, very sick on the boat. My brother had a ball. We were in second, second passage. You know, the first class, second class. And then there's steerage and so on, which I didn't get to know very much of, because I was sick in bed most of the time throwing up dreadfully. The last day I finally recovered. And I particularly remember the arrival and everyone pointing out the Statue of Liberty and "we're here," "we made it," and the excitement of everybody. Um, the particular memory I wanted to share with you was my memory in Ellis Island itself, which I found, well, which I haven't forgotten. I think by then I was old enough for things to take hold, for one thing, and for another thing, I thought they were extraordinary.

Now that I'm talking about it, it seems ridiculous. Um, we arrived there and everyone got separated to a different section. And the first night they were celebrating Christmas. I had never heard of Christmas. And they had a movie, which I had never seen or heard, and there was Santa Claus, and all the beauty of Christmas suddenly hit me. What is this, you know, I, very exciting. And we got little tinsy gifts. That was the first night.

PHILLIPS: They were provided by Ellis Island?

KAIZ: Yeah. It was like a large assembly, a huge assembly, and all of the new, newcomers were, maybe they had several seatings, I don't know, but we were in on one seating. I guess we had cots for beds, and we were assigned our beds. And the next day, my mother was taken from us. Uh, Mother had, uh, had pneumonia, a very severe case of pneumonia, and had very, you see how my knuckles are? Her nails were very, very bad. It could have been arthritis. Who knows? But evidently they questioned that and wondered if she was diseased in any way, and did not want to let her in the States. So they took her away. We did not

know why or what. Mom was gone, and there was just my brother and I, at that point. Incidentally, when we started traveling to Poland, we started this trip, my grandmother was with us and, uh, two uncles and an aunt. In Poland we separated. They went on a different boat, and we went on a different boat. One uncle went via Canada, the oldest, I guess. Um, anyhow, Mother was not with us. So there was my brother and I, and we had to keep clean. I remember taking his wash and washing it, and all the elderly ladies "ooing," this little kid washing clothes, and I felt so proud and grown up. And I thought I was taking care of my brother. And they provided food for us. I ate my first hot dog there. I ate my first banana there and these were revelations. You know, I'd never seen them, very exciting for this little kid. The next day my brother came down with the measles. They took him away, and I was left alone. And, uh, they put an identification tag on me, the authorities, I'm sure. And, of course, we had no idea what it was. Now, talk about frightened. Then I was frightened. I was alone and there was this tag, and everyone was guessing what does this mean, nobody knowing any more than I do. I'm talking

about the adults now. Maybe it means they're sending me back. Maybe it means they're sending me to my father without the family. Maybe it means that I am sick and I have to be separated from everybody else. The stories that came up from this frightened this poor little kid to death. But we did have some relatives in New York that came to see us, and they saw just me, and they reassured me that nothing like that was going to happen. Two days later I had the measles, and, uh, you've been to Ellis Island. I wonder if it's changed. It must have. But from where we were, I had to get on a little boat and, it seemed to me, go the greatest distance in, it was like a tunnel, a long, long tunnel till I got to the hospital. Eventually I landed in the next bed to my brother, which it was great having the measles so I could be with him and be sick. We still didn't know what happened to my mother. Uh, we were there about four or five days, maybe three days, and a man came to see us, what we thought was a new doctor. My father. It was my dad. (she shows a photograph of him) Um, their fiftieth wedding anniversary, I think. He was a tall, blonde man, about six feet tall. All right, we were in the contagious ward, so

he had to put on a white coat. And he was a tremendous kibitzer. So he came in to see us. He was a doctor.

PHILLIPS: Your father was a doctor.

KAIZ: He pretended to be a doctor, for us. Don't forget, he hadn't seen us. He'd never seen me, and, he'd seen my brother when he was a year-and-a-half or two. He had to be two because, maybe three. Uh, my brother, being older than I, had sort of a feeling that this was our father, so he kind of whispered to me, "I think that's our father." And, of course, I didn't believe anything like this. This man certainly looked and acted like a doctor. And then he said, "I do know your father. I've met him. I hear he's a very nice man." And he kept referring to him in different ways. And we kept saying, "Why didn't he come? Why are you here?" Eventually he broke down and told us that it was him, but it was an amusing and very, very curious kind of an incident. Um, there were many more incidents there, but these are some of the highlights. The washing of his clothes, the big fuss of the washing of his clothes.

The enormousness of the place. It was huge. And I think there were easily thousands of people there while we were there. Eventually they released my mother. I got well, and we came to Chicago.

PHILLIPS: So you were there for how long?

KAIZ: In Ellis Island, about three weeks. We left my brother, who had not recovered yet, and he followed, our cousins put him on the train, and he met us in Chicago. He followed by himself, which was pretty good because if I was almost eight, he had to be almost ten. Um, I wish I could tell you some more interesting things. I tried, I need my aunt and my uncle, because they remembered so many beautiful things of Russia itself. Uh, I just didn't remember my experiences, really. Politically, it was rough all the way.

PHILLIPS: You mean in the Soviet Union, in Russia?

KAIZ: Yes, yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. But I can't really throw any historical light on it, and I think that's what you're after.

PHILLIPS: Oh, yeah, and then, then you moved to Chicago and

what happens?

KAIZ: What happens? We move into an apartment.

PHILLIPS: So why in Chicago, again?

KAIZ: Dad was living here. He was in business at the time.

PHILLIPS: What sort of business?

KAIZ: He had, uh, in Rogers Park, sort of a delicatessen, a rather, you know, a, not an everyday food shop but a specialty food shop where people bought better goods. He was pretty well established here by then. He had at one time been a, uh, a wagon, uh, a man that drove a wagon. What would you call that? A taxi? No, because he was moving things. And I think he had tried to be a policeman at one time, because I remembered telling all my little friends as I was growing up, my Dad had been a policeman. And by the time we were here that's what he was doing. He had this rather uppity kind of deli in Rogers Park. But we lived on the west side. That doesn't mean anything to you, but Rogers Park at that time was a tony neighborhood, and we lived in very much the ethnic Jewish neighborhood. Um, we were enrolled in

school. Started off with first grade. In two or three years I was in eighth grade. Not because I was bright, and as a matter of fact I regret, now that this happened, I've always regretted it because I never really learned how to study, and I missed that. I tried going to college. It didn't work for me, because I did not have a good pattern of study. And my brother also dropped out in high school. I dropped out of high school, too, which was, I think, because we had an inadequate background. Uh, and we hit a Depression, which was terrible. And my Dad, who had been a rather proud businessman, had a newspaper stand, and was happy to have that so that he could just manage to bring home bread, and got into debt a good deal. What else would you like to know? It's very hard to sit and talk about, you have to really bring the memories out. I'm sure there's much more about Russia if you asked certain questions, but I don't know what.

PHILLIPS: Yeah. I think, largely, I mean, that's to some extent the story. I mean, if there's anything else that, um, that Ellis Island material was interesting.

KAIZ: Both my aunt and uncle had this wonderful facility of weaving stories. Whether they were true, or . . . You know, there might be a kind of truth in it, and they would build it up and make it sound so wonderful and so interesting that I would sit and listen to the stories. But right now ask me what they are, I just can't . . .

PHILLIPS: Well, I think, I guess we'll call it quits.

KAIZ: That's fine.

PHILLIPS: Okay. So that's the end of 382 [DP-008] about, uh, what is it, eleven forty-five or thereabouts. That's the end of the interview.