

EI-10/BELARSKY

EI-10

ISABEL BELARSKY

BIRTH DATE: JUNE 26, 1920

INTERVIEW DATE: NOVEMBER 27, 1990 AND FEBRUARY 24, 1993

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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RUSSIA, 1930

AGE 9

PORT: CHERBOURG PASSAGE ON THE **AQUITANIA**

RESIDENCES: ODESSA AND LENINGRAD: IN US: PEEKSKILL, NY;  
SALT LAKE CITY, UT; LOS ANGELES, CA; SHEEPSHEAD BAY,  
BROOKLYN

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Isabel Belarsky was initially interviewed in November of 1990. While assembling oral history material for a temporary exhibit about ocean liners at the museum, I interviewed her again in 1993 specifically about her voyage on the **Aquitania**.

Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Oral Historian, 3/5/1995.

Isabel was interviewed again with Bertha Krystal (EI-1340), who assisted the Belarskys when they first arrived.

We have in the library a number of videotapes of documentaries done, by a number of countries, about Ellis Island in which Isabel is interviewed. Janet Levine, Ph.D., Oral Historian, 11/04

SIGRIST: .....What is the date today? 28th, right? , Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. It is Tuesday, November 27th, 1990.

I am here with Isabel Belarsky, who came from Russia in 1930 when she was nine years old. Could you please state your full name and date of birth.

BELARSKY: I, my name is Isabel Belarsky. Some people call me "Belishka." I was born in Odessa, June 26th, 1920.

SIGRIST: And did you live in Odessa for a long time?

BELARSKY: No, we didn't live in Odessa. It was during the time of the pogroms and my grandparents lived in a small town, "shehtl" in Jewish they say, shehtl near Odessa in the Ukraine. It was called "Chistopol" and we used to spend our summers there.

SIGRIST: Where did you spend the rest of the time?

BELARSKY The rest of the time we lived in Leningrad until we came to America.

SIGRIST: What kind of house did you live in in Leningrad?

BELARSKY In Leningrad it was an apartment house. They had six rooms. Each room had a family. One bathroom but the bathroom wasn't a regular bathroom. It just had, it had a bathtub but we couldn't take baths because you had to get coal to heat it and it was too expensive. So once, maybe once a month my father would stand in line, get some coal, heat up the water and the three of us would take a bath. Not at the same time but first I would go, then my mother and then my father and they would carry me back to the room, to that one room.

SIGRIST: How many family members? Were there just the three of you?

BELARSKY: I'm the only child so it was just Mama, Papa and I. Papa was a student at the Leningrad Conservatory of Music.

SIGRIST: And what was his full name?

BELARSKY: His name was, at that time it was already Isador Belarsky. The change of the name, originally it was Isador Livchitz. But they changed the name when I was born because it was Belishka. So it was "Bella." My mother's name was Clara so my father made it "Belar." Then the "sky." Every Russian ends the name with "sky." So it became "Isador Belarsky."

SIGRIST: I see. And what did your father do then? Did he make his living as a singer or was he doing another job?

BELARSKY: No, no. He was going to the Conservatory for about four years and he graduated the Conservatory in Leningrad in 1929, just before coming to America. But part of the Conservatory, he was in the Opera House and he was singing. He was a bass, basso cantato, as you know. It's not profundo. Chaliapin was a basso profundo but he was a basso cantato. And my remembrance of the time, I don't know, maybe I was five years old, of going to hear all the operas in that big, beautiful opera house in Leningrad.

SIGRIST: Was your mother musical at all?

BELARSKY: No, she had a lovely voice but she was a real mama.

SIGRIST: I see.

BELARSKY: She took care of us.

SIGRIST: Did she do, say, the cooking in the house?

BELARSKY: Oh, yes. And in Leningrad, in the six rooms and we had one room, we had the biggest room because I was the only child. In the room was a baby grand piano, a bed for them, a brass bed, a bed for them, a little bed for me and a cot. My father's sister lived with us in that one room.

SIGRIST: What was her name?

BELARSKY: Eva. Eva Livchitz. She's in America now. She came, she lives in San Jose, California. She started to live with us when she was about fourteen years old because my mother was very ill. She had a miscarriage in Chistopol and she had to be taken out on a stretcher and stay in bed for almost a year, so we needed someone to take care of her and me. So this Aunt Eva, who was a child, she was about fourteen years old, came to stay with us to take care of my mother and myself. Now in this room was a big table where we ate but the kitchen was in the beginning at a different part where six women or five women were cooking. Not a stove, each one had a, uh, I don't know what it's called, but they had to pump to get the heat, to get oil in there.

SIGRIST: It's sort of a communal kitchen then...

BELARSKY: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: For these six families.

BELARSKY: For the six families and, uh...

SIGRIST: Were you related to any of these people?

BELARSKY: No, no, no. Originally this was an apartment for one family. Then Mr. Stalin came into existence and he made everybody take a room. So they had to, the original couple that were living there had their room. Their son-in-law and daughter lived in another room and then they rented out the other rooms.

SIGRIST: Was this all on one floor?

BELARSKY: It was on the sixth floor.

SIGRIST: Sixth floor. So each floor was like this.

BELARSKY: Yes. Now, when you had to go and visit somebody, outside the door was the name with ringing, one for Paul and two for Brian and three for Livchitz and four for somebody else. And immediately when this apartment was made into this community living they took off the front entrance where the elevator was so people had to walk up and they had to go through the kitchen into the apartment.

SIGRIST: Into that communal...

BELARSKY: Into that communal and that's where the bell was.

SIGRIST: I see. Were there other children in this...?

BELARSKY: No, I was the only one, spoiled by everybody because, uh, you know, this nice little girl. And, uh, I had a very interesting experience because being the only child and the only Jewish couple that lived there. And I used to run to each room because I could never be alone. I couldn't even sleep alone. I liked...

SIGRIST: To be around people.

BELARSKY: To be around people. And one of the couples was, her name was Paula and his name was Ivan and they had no children and, especially Paula, just adored me but she was very religious. In those years people still went to church. It wasn't completely prohibited. So she used to take me to church with her and I would like mimic, like children, follow her and go to all the ceremonies and Eastertime. The Russian Easter is called "Pasca" and she, we used to color the eggs and I would go at midnight with her holding a little candle because you had to look for Christ. And my mother was free about it, I mean, she didn't prohibit me from going.

SIGRIST: I was going to say, how did your parents feel about this?

BELARSKY: No, they were, well, you have to understand that my father, being a student, it was a different type of life than the normal life. And, as a matter of fact, it wasn't about, I don't know, I was seven years old that I knew I was Jewish because we lived in this surrounding with students and the other people were cosmopolitan. There wasn't, they weren't fanatic religious type people. And I didn't know the difference until Paula told me Easter morning when we were coloring the eggs. And she would make a "pasca." It's a cake, Easter cake, put a little rose in the middle. She said,

"Belishka, you are not, this is not your holiday. You're Jewish." And I ran to my mother crying, "What does that mean?" And my mother was waiting for a time to explain to me, even though summertimes we went to this small town, Chistopol, to my grandparents with all the children. My father had six sisters and some of them were still there. But I didn't understand quite. He wasn't a fanatic, religious man.

SIGRIST: So your parents didn't go to temple regularly or anything like that.

BELARSKY: No, you couldn't go in those, even at that time there was no, there was no temple in Leningrad. And as I say he was a young student. He was maybe twenty years older than I was so the, and he had a life of music and of students and they used to come to our one room because he was the only one that was married with a child. So there was laughter and there was song and the musicians would come.

SIGRIST: I was going to ask you, you know, on a floor with six different families living in close quarters like that, how did people react to playing the piano or to your father's singing because surely it was noisy?

BELARSKY: Well, they were a different type of people. The only ones that complained was this Ivan. He complained about the electricity because everybody paid a certain amount of money for the electricity. Now he used to come home from work and go to sleep and he didn't need the electricity and he would get drunk. He would get drunk that Paula and I would take off his boots in the kitchen and put him to bed. And he would curse and he would yell at her that she had to, in the middle of the winter, run out and to get him more, more liquor to drink. And he used to cut the wire because he didn't want to pay his share so they were always fixing the wire. We

were always in the dark. And, but, they didn't mind. I mean, the music wasn't disturbing to him.

SIGRIST: How did your own mother feel about you spending so much time with the other couple?

BELARSKY: Oh, she loved it because this Paula was a peasant type even though they lived in Leningrad but they were...

SIGRIST: She was not a student, only her...

BELARSKY: No, no. My father was the only one that was a student in that...

SIGRIST: So what did...?

BELARSKY: The others worked.

SIGRIST: They worked.

BELARSKY: Worked at certain things. I don't know.

SIGRIST: What was making money in your household? Did your father have another job somewhere? Did your mother...?

BELARSKY: No, no, no. The government. They paid for his schooling.

SIGRIST: I see.

BELARSKY: And then my grandfather helped out because he lived in Ukraine at that

time. Up to the time we left Russia he was considered a so called "rich man" of the town. He was in the business of eggs. He used to sell by carloads of eggs.

SIGRIST: Your grandfather who lived outside of Odessa?

BELARSKY: Yeah, in Chistopol. He would sell car loads of eggs to Berlin and so when we spent the summer in Chistopol and we'd come back with food, enough food for almost the whole winter, with geese and with dozens of eggs and other things that my grandmother would make for us. So that way we had some food. And I'm sure he helped out in so called financial, uh, and then the schooling, the Conservatory, being a student I think they paid a certain amount.

SIGRIST: A stipend.

BELARSKY: Yeah, to go to school.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about your grandparents. They seem sort of interesting people. Let's start by describing their house. Describe the house that they lived in.

BELARSKY: They had, well, you have to visualize a village, a small village with nice homes, you know, many rooms, one level and they heated by a sto..., an oven that they would put, I guess, wood to heat up and one big kitchen. And my father, as I said, had six sisters. He was the only son. And during the summertime they would all be there with their children. I was the oldest grandchild. And we spent only...the furniture was beautiful because in those days they were able to get the furniture from Berlin because he

was dealing with Berlin. And my mother came from another town nearby, so called near by, you know. There you had to take a horse and buggy over, maybe, overnight and that was "nearby." She was from a town called Masckifska. She was an only child too and her father was in the same business. He was a competitor to my father's father and that's how they met. And my grandfather, my mother's father, used to travel to Berlin and he would bring her, she had a little fur coat and he brought her a piano. This was unheard of in those years to have a piano. (Paul laughs) And, but when they were old enough they were sent, both my father and my mother, to Odessa to go to school, to "gymnasia," which is like a high school but it's a higher level high school than here high school. It was almost a college level. And that's where they actually met, my mother and father.

SIGRIST: So your mother was educated, also.

BELARSKY: She was educated. She was older than my father.

SIGRIST: Yes, by how much?

BELARSKY: I would imagine three, four years.

SIGRIST: I see.

BELARSKY: And she had an interesting life and I don't know if I should tell this but I think it's of interest now. They never told me this but during the time when they knew each other, my father was probably eighteen years old and as much, I don't believe any older and my mother, let's say she was twenty three, twenty four, an only daughter, beautiful and wealthy at the time. But

it was bad times. And my father was arrested, to be sent, all young men, especially Jews, well, Jews and non Jews, to be sent to the army. And at that time to be sent to the army was forever.

SIGRIST: Was this during World War One or earlier?

BELARSKY: Earlier. This would be around 1917, '18.

SIGRIST: About World War One.

BELARSKY: Yes. And he was arrested. And my mother was very much in love with him. They weren't married yet but she went to the Commissar and she was very beautiful and this Commissar or whoever it was, he liked the way she looked and he said he will do it if she goes with him and she did. And you can imagine in a small town an only child to do this to save her boyfriend. It was more than a boyfriend, I mean, "boyfriend" sounds so flat. It's almost like a story from the classics.

SIGRIST: But he was released.

BELARSKY: And he was released.

SIGRIST: He was released.

BELARSKY: When my grandfather, my father's father, and the family found out she became like a miracle, that she gave life, so she was adored by them all. And this is something that they never told me.

SIGRIST: How did you find out?

BELARSKY: By this Aunt Eva who came to America and she told me they all knew but they never...somehow or other my father used to say, "Mama saved my life," but like this and my mother used to say she begged this man, she was kissing his boots but I, you know, a child never realizes that parents could be in this position. So it never dawned upon me that how she saved his life and that's how it happened.

SIGRIST: Wow.

BELARSKY: That in itself is a story.

SIGRIST: Yes, indeed.

BELARSKY: I wrote about this. I have a certain manuscript that I wrote about these experiences; of Leningrad, Chistopol, about my parents, about the sisters. And, uh, I think we went away from how the house was. Well, the house was a big house, family house, and the children would be there in the summertime.

SIGRIST: What were your grandparents like as people? Describe your grandfather to me.

BELARSKY: My grandfather was a very tall man. He could hardly get through, you know, the door. He had a little beard. He was very handsome. My grandmother was tiny. She was my height. Very sweet, very nice and just, living just for my grandfather, you know, in those days before the women's movement.

SIGRIST: Was she a good cook?

BELARSKY: She was a wonderful cook and she cooked for these six, well, there were more. There were about, every time we sat down at a table there were fifteen, eighteen people there and my grandfather would invite poor people and people would come for overnight,...merchants...

SIGRIST: Did, as a child, do you remember anything that your grandmother made that you liked?

BELARSKY: Oh, yes. My grandmother made geese and she made, well, wonderful dishes but somehow or other I remember the geese and, uh...

SIGRIST: Did you have to help slaughter them?

BELARSKY: No, I had nothing to do with...the other thing, near the house, and that was another, I think it was his business. He used to deal with watermelons and in the Ukraine they grew watermelons. And we used to, as children, would get a hold of this watermelon and in front of the house was a little, uh, two benches and, you know, slide down. We used to stand there with the watermelon, what do you call that?

SIGRIST: The rind?

BELARSKY: No, the pits.

SIGRIST: Oh, the seeds.

BELARSKY: We used to go like this (she pantomimes spitting watermelon seeds). So

someone would walk out of the house and they would slip. I mean that, that was fun. (Paul laughs) And I remember those watermelons, the taste of the watermelons and I used to, and I remember my mother used to make jam jam out of roses, my grandmother, and the aroma of roses being cooked in these big pots. And they put, you know, sugar, I guess, and it was delicious.

SIGRIST: So you enjoyed going to your grandparent's.

BELARSKY: Oh, I loved it.

SIGRIST: You looked forward to the summers.

BELARSKY: I loved the summers.

SIGRIST: Now, were your grandparents musical?

BELARSKY: No, but it was amazing that my grandfather was supportive to my father's singing. He started, my father, Papa, I always call him "Papa," started to sing when he was like thirteen years old, even before his voice changed. And, by the way, he didn't believe in children singing until they were sixteen, seventeen because the voice changes. He used to sing the holidays, you know, Rosh Hashana, the Jewish holidays. He used to be sent to synagogues in different towns to do the services because during his childhood he went to seder. That's a Jewish school to learn the prayers and the holidays and he used to do that in synagogues in other towns to do Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur services. And then, when he went to school in Odessa, in the gymnasium, they heard him singing so they sent him to the Odessa Music School, before he went to the Leningrad.

Meanwhile, they were married, my parents were married.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what date they were married?

BELARSKY: Yes, they were married September 12th.

SIGRIST: And the year?

BELARSKY: The year would be 1919. I was born nine months, June of 1920. I just made it. (Paul laughs) And they were married in the woods actually because it was during the pogroms. And when my mother saved my father, so my grandfather was modern enough, sophisticated enough to say to his son, to his only son, "Strewlich, you have to marry Clarunia." That's Russia. "Otherwise she's lost." Imagine in 1919 to have this stigma. So they got somebody, I imagine a rabbi, and they married off these two young people. My father couldn't have been more than nineteen and my mother, let's say she was twenty two, twenty three. And they were married. During the time that I was coming in June of 1920, it was during the real pogroms. And I was born in June so they were in Chistopol. And at that time they had these "petruloffs," a certain clan that would come through the town and would burn the homes and the Jewish people used to hide in the cellars. The cellars were equipped. They were deep enough, cold enough that they could bring food in there and they saved their lives, some of them. My mother's mother's and father's lives were not saved. They were hiding and they were burned, I never knew them, during one of these pogroms.

SIGRIST: The raids, yeah.

BELARSKY: The raids. Yeah, but I was being born at that time when they were hiding in the cellars. So during the middle of the night, my grandfather had influence with the railroad people because he dealt with them and he was able to get us on a train to Odessa and that's why I was born in Odessa Hospital and my father brought my mother there. Another interesting little episode that while I was being born, June 26, 1920, in the same hospital, maybe a few days before or a few days after, Sholom Alachem's grandson was born and he is, lives in New York. Kaufman. His sister is Belle Kaufman, the one who wrote a book, well, she writes many things, uh, "Upstairs, Downstairs," about being a school teacher. Well, anyway, her brother, now that was Dr. Kaufman and at that time the nurse came to my mother. She said, "In the other room Sholom Alechem's grandson was born." And that was a great event because Sholom Alechem was the greatest Yiddish writer of stories. My memories of Chistopol are vast because it was merry times, good times and the same way in Leningrad because being an only child with so many families. I ate in everybody's room and I ran to everybody and then the experience of going to church, seeing Russian weddings, the Greek Orthodox, which is very festive.

SIGRIST: Yes, very grand.

BELARSKY: Very grand, with the crowns and the brides. And I went through all that. My parents didn't feel that they kept me away just because we were Jewish. And yet I had a feeling that after I learned we were Jewish, it was, it made very little difference. The only thing that I used to come back to Chistopol and I used to tell my grandparents, "My holidays are prettier." (she laughs) I'm sure it made my grandparents very happy to, happy to hear that.

SIGRIST: Or worried, probably. (he laughs)

BELARSKY: To hear, because the Russian Easter is very festive, you know. And then, being an only child during the Christmastime, they would have, one of the people would have a Christmas tree and I would have, and I would go to sleep early the night before because they would say Santa Claus is coming and I would get all kinds of gifts and made a big...

SIGRIST: You had it made.

BELARSKY: I had both worlds, you know. I had the Passover goodies and I had the Russian Easter goodies.

SIGRIST: Well, let's talk about the decision to come to America.

BELARSKY: Oh, the decision to come. Now during this time, would be in 1929 when my father was just graduating, he had an uncle, my ...grandfather's brother, who lived in America. He was involved in the turkey business in Utah and there was a commission made at that time in America to come to Russia to see a certain section, Beerbijon. It, they thought it would be an area that they would bring Russian Jews to this area.

SIGRIST: As a resettlement?

BELARSKY: A resettlement. And the commission was made up of this Benjamin Brown and Professor Harris of Brigham Young University, provo and a few others, few professors, few people who were in agriculture, uh, knowledge. And they were going there to see if that land was possible to

bring in water, et cetera. So he arrived in Russia and he came to see his brother Morsha Livchitz. His name was Benjamin Brown. He got the name Benjamin Brown because he came to America maybe 1905 when he was a young boy and he worked for some store and their name was "Brown," so they used to say, "Here comes the Brown boy." So he kept, he made...

SIGRIST: He just kind of made it his name.

BELARSKY: Made his name. Another brother arrived in America, Nathan Livchitz. He took the name of "Brown," so there are many Browns in Los Angeles, the Browns. Now he came to, during the summertime, he came to see my grandfather and all the sisters and my father. We were all there. We have a picture of that whole clan. And he brought along Professor Harris and we as children were so excited. We were running after these two Americans and then they went back to Moscow and my father went back. He was singing in the Moscow Opera and this President Harris, Franklin Harris, heard him in the Moscow Opera and liked what he heard. And it was a combination; Benjamin Brown had the money to bring us over but mainly Harris had the possibility of bringing him to teach at the Brigham Young University. It took almost a year. Harris went to the Russian office and they arranged only a six month visa was able to come to America. And somehow or other they allowed my mother and I to come along, which was almost rare. There was no immigration from Russia in 1930. We were the last of the immigration and that's how the whole picture started.

SIGRIST: So what happened? Did your father come in and make an announcement one day that, "We're leaving in a month," or...

BELARSKY: Well, that was quite a difficult situation but they knew about it. They were trying to come and they felt this was a treasure, once in a million. They wouldn't stop anything like that. And before leaving we were in Chistopol and I remember staying up all all night because the train would leave two o'clock, two a.m. to Leningrad and they would wake me up and it was already, by that time it would be cold. My teeth used to chatter and the train stopped for two minutes because it wasn't a regular stop but my grandfather had influence for the train to stop for us. And when the train would stop all these packages would have to get into the train, two o'clock in the morning, with these crated things of food and many times things would be left on the platform and the last minute somebody would see there's a pail covered with cloth and somebody saw this but they threw it in but they didn't realize it was eggs, so you can imagine. And one time it was "pavidla." Pavidla is prune jam, which is sticky. And they threw it into an open door and it went through the whole train.

SIGRIST: Oh, dear.

BELARSKY: And you can imagine what happened. And that was one of the, and one year my mother, father and I were going to Leningrad. I'm skipping a bit. But we were going from Chistopol to Leningrad or to Moscow and the train was derailed and there were two hundred people that were killed. By miracle we, there were only two cars that were remaining and we were on one of those two cars. And during the night in the woods, cold, it was, you know, after September it gets terribly cold in the woods, they made a bonfire from this, from the remains of the train, the compartments, so called compartments are bottom and one on top and a little seat against the window and that's where I slept. Above me was the baggage but

luckily the baggage fell down but I slid under this bench and I was saved that way. But no lights. Nobody had any matches and the yelling and the screaming is still in my ears. My mother lost her voice for about a month. My father was just injured slightly but we came through. And we stayed in the woods the whole night until another train, came a train full of animals, that type of train, and they brought us to, to the next town where they had doctors and nurses to take care of the remaining. And this is, of course, vivid in my eyes, naturally.

SIGRIST: Sure, sure.

BELARSKY: And that's how we, and then they put us in another train. We came to Moscow that way. Um, where were we?

SIGRIST: Let's, let's, we're going to get you to America.(they laugh)

BELARSKY: Let's come to America, the Golden Land!

SIGRIST: The Golden Land!

BELARSKY: I brought you the cassette of "the Golden Land."

SIGRIST: Right. So you left from...?

BELARSKY: We left from Leningrad.

SIGRIST: From Leningrad to Cherbourg.

BELARSKY: Well, we left from Leningrad and everybody that was able to come and

see us off and some of the students, friends of my father, and their last words were, he was called "Isa," "Isa, take us out. Save us. Take us out of Russia," singers from the Conservatory. And we went from Leningrad to Berlin.

SIGRIST: By train?

BELARSKY: By train.

SIGRIST: Yes. Do you remember that at all or...?

BELARSKY: And already, already there was a feeling we were hated. I felt it. If Papa would stop and ask somebody information they were, didn't want to have anything to do with us because we were Russian at that time, Russian Jews, 'though they didn't know by facial but there was already that feeling. And we stayed in Berlin almost a month and we came to Berlin, well, we have to go back. In from Leningrad to Berlin we went through Warsaw. In Warsaw they stripped us for anything. My mother had a carico Persian coat. They stripped it to look for something. You know, people were looking for diamonds, money or whatever. We had nothing. The only thing we had, my father, this Benjamin Brown sent ten dollars, ten dollars American money. That's all we were allowed to bring. When we went through Warsaw, through the, uh, at that time we were carrying the samovar because Benjamin Brown said the only thing we should bring is a samovar.

SIGRIST: Is this a silver samovar? Brass samovar?

BELARSKY: Brass. And this samovar, when we went through customs in Poland, Warsaw, they said it couldn't be brought just like that. It had to be crated

and my father paid ten dollars to crate the samovar, so we were without any money. Except, they didn't tell me, my father put two dollar bills in my shoe and when we were searched, in the nude actually, stripped, but they didn't see those two dollars. Now when we came to Berlin he had no more money but he knew of this pension in Berlin because at one time, when I was about two years old, he was leaving Russia. And he lived, we lived in Berlin for a little while but he went back to study in Leningrad. But he stayed in a certain pension in Berlin, so when we got off the train he took a taxi and told them to drive us to that pension and he figured that the people there would know him and they would pay for the taxi. When we arrived there it was different people but they paid for the taxi and at that time he sent a telegram to New York to Benjamin Brown to send some money to us. So we stayed a little while in Berlin and then we took a train from Berlin to Paris. In Paris we had some relatives, not close but, you know, so we stayed in Paris without permission, actually. And so my father was hiding from any police; police shouldn't stop us because there was no passport to stay in Paris. But how can you miss Paris and not to spend a few weeks in Paris, you know. It's once in a lifetime. So we stayed there and every night we were terribly frightened that somebody shouldn't ask for the passport.

SIGRIST: Did you stay in the same place all that time you were in Paris or did you...?

BELARSKY: Yes. No, we stayed, the three of us couldn't be with one family so I stayed with one family with this Lucille that I'm still friends with and my parents stayed in the room with other relatives, poor people, but they gave whatever they could. And we stayed that way in Paris until the boat was leaving from Cherbourg, the Aquatania. And Benjamin Brown was nice

enough to get tickets. We weren't in the lowest. We were second class.

SIGRIST: So you had a cabin.

BELARSKY: We had a cabin and it was February and it was cold and it was wavy. Most of the people on this ship stayed in their cabin the whole time because it was shaky.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick?

BELARSKY: Yes, I got sick. We didn't spend too much time eating.

SIGRIST: Indeed. Did your parents get sick, too?

BELARSKY: They got sick, too, but we managed. I don't think my mother was out much but my father and I were out a little bit. During the trip my father sang.

SIGRIST: Yes, tell me a little bit about that.

BELARSKY: He sang "Ramona." Do you know that song? (she begins to sing)

SIGRIST: Yes, a 1920's song.

BELARSKY: Yeah, 1930's song. He sang it in Russian and he even got, I don't know whatever happened, he got a little prize in the big salon and he was very popular after that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember eating on the boat at all? Do you ...remember...?

BELARSKY: I remember eating on the boat and especially eating a banana. Didn't know what to do with this banana, you know, never saw a banana before. (end of cassette tape, side one) But on the boat, on the ship, the boat, we met a man, an America man, American Jew, Seltzer, his name was Seltzer, who was traveling very often. He was in the costume jewelry business. He used to go to Japan to buy pearls and Europe and he was coming back and he befriended us. And so he taught us how to eat certain things and how to go about and he was with us all the time, 'til we arrived in New York on the 14th Street Pier. And this is where I will begin with Ellis Island. Now we arrived February 8th in the morning and this Mr. Seltzer says, "I'll go out and look for Benjamin Brown," because he had to have a bond to get us out, "and you stay where you are." This, let's say we arrived noontime, he leaves us and it's one and it's two and it's five and we are the only three people left on the Aquitania. Maybe a few other people but nobody to speak out language.

SIGRIST: Your parents must have been very nervous.

BELARSKY: Nervous! And we're sitting in the lounge and it's four and it's eight and it's ten and it's two o'clock in the morning. Nobody shows up. Finally two o'clock in the morning this Seltzer shows up with another man with this tall tale of his experience. He left the ship and he was looking under the "B"s, you know, everything alphabetical, people, Benjamin Brown, no Benjamin Brown. He had the telephone number of Benjamin Brown's business office in New York. He called up the office, "Where's Benjamin Brown?" "He's in Los Angeles marrying his daughter February 9th" Well, he spoke to the secretary, who was a cousin. Actually, she was a first cousin to my father, Bertha Crystal, and he said, "Do you know this family is coming?"

Well, she heard they were coming but she doesn't know how but she understands that there are other people that have the money and the other man had an accident, appendix attack. He's in the hospital. A sister of Benjamin Brown was looking for a room for us and she was hit by a taxi. She's in the hospital.

SIGRIST: Oh, dear.

BELARSKY: So they had to reach a certain Abe Shein in Peekskill, New York, and it was too late to reach him and meanwhile this Seltzer had to tell us and he got a hold of somebody to get back. He said, "The next, nobody can meet you now but tomorrow you will be taken to Ellis Island." And so the next day they brought us to this...

SIGRIST: So you slept on the boat.

BELARSKY: We slept on the boat and the next morning they brought us here.

SIGRIST: How did they bring you? How did you get here?

BELARSKY: With the same...

SIGRIST: By the same ferry?

BELARSKY: Same ferry.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

BELARSKY: And it was frightening because it was wintertime and the winds and the

snow. We arrived here. In 1930 there were no immigrants. It was criminal element who were detained here before we were sent away. So this was the criminal element that we came to. And carrying this baggage, the samovar...

SIGRIST: Oh, your parents must have just been besides themselves.

BELARSKY: Besides themselves going through these halls. And they had to go to court to be, to a judge and we were sitting there for hours. And when it came time for us court closed, four o'clock. That's how we stayed overnight. We stayed overnight.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about that. What was that like?

BELARSKY: That was fantastic. First of all the sleeping arrangements were about forty beds in one room without sheets or anything for women and for men. And everytime we went any place we were counted back and forth and during the day they gave us ten minutes outside to get fresh air and then we were counted again. The eating, en masse, was a big bowl of soup. You know, these big things and again counted when we sat down , when we left. And during the times when we had a little time we would be in that big room and the other people were doing arts and crafts or playing cards. There was nobody to talk to.

SIGRIST: No children, probably.

BELARSKY: No children and no body of immigrants. We were the only ones.

SIGRIST: Did you talk to anybody? Did your parents talk to anyone?

BELARSKY: Nobody, no. They were just carrying the samovar and the baggage because we couldn't leave it any place. And my father was cursing and he was yelling in Russian and carrying this crated samovar and I have the samovar in my living room and I love it. You know, its my treasure. I'll leave you a picture of that samovar. And, uh, we stayed, now I don't remember leaving that day or another day because I just can't visualize until this Abraham Shein from Peekskill came to take us off.

SIGRIST: And he came to...to here?

BELARSKY: He came to Ellis Island with the money. I don't remember how much it was at that time. I think five hundred dollars bond.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, for instance when you and your mother were separated from your father at night, were there lots of women in that room?

BELARSKY: Yes, there were many, as I say. I don't know if there were twenty or forty. I mean to me it was a lot, a lot of cots. And that was it. And in the morning we went to this mess hall to have breakfast, I guess, something, and then we went to this courtroom and sat there until they called us. And the judge didn't speak Russian but there was a German. He understood a little German. Yiddish sounds sometimes a little German so that's how they got together. And the questions I remember so distinctly. The question was, "If you have a chance to remain in America, would you?" and my father made sure to say, "No," because that was, that was a no-no because we had to be back.

SIGRIST: Right, because you had a six month visa.

BELARSKY: We had a six month visa where he had to report to Brigham Young and so when we arrived back in Fourteenth Street Pier with this Abe Shein, we stayed the first night in the Union Square Hotel near Klein's, you know that area, not any more.

SIGRIST: Well, your parents must have been thrilled just to get off of Ellis Island.

BELARSKY: Oh, and I was thrilled to have the room in Union Square Hotel because we had a private bathroom and to take a bath because in Russia, I never told you the incident in this apartment. We had this bathtub, one room was a bath but the toilet was separate, a little room, and most of the time we had one young man living there and he used to come home drunk and he would lock himself in this little room and nobody was able to go in there. Only they had that transom, it's called "transom"...

SIGRIST: Yes, transom.

BELARSKY: So they would pick me up with some kind of nail or something and I would open up the latch. And that's how we found him and got into the...

SIGRIST: And got to use the bathroom.

BELARSKY: Got to use the bathroom. And in the morning all these people were in line to sue that room.

SIGRIST: Well, so now you have your bathroom at the Union Square Hotel.

BELARSKY: Oh, now we have our own bathroom but not enough room for the three of

us to sleep so my parents slept there and I went to sleep with this Bertha Crystal, who had a little room someplace in this vicinity and I slept with her that night until we got a room on Tenth Street and Second Avenue with a family.

SIGRIST: Was there a certain amount of time before your father had to report...?

BELARSKY: Well, he had to report almost immediately and we remained in New York in this bungalow colony in Peekskill with this Abe Shein. It was a summer bungalow colony but this Abe Shein had a, uh, it was winterized so we stayed with him and my father went to Utah.

SIGRIST: So you and your mother never went to Utah?

BELARSKY: Oh, yes. We did, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: You did eventually.

BELARSKY: We were there. He was teaching four summers...

SIGRIST: I see.

BELARSKY: So we used to go to Utah, to Utah and then one year he was teaching at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City but only the summer session because during that period of time he was already accepted in the San Francisco Opera House, Chicago Opera House. Then, in about...

SIGRIST: Did you just keep extending your visa?

BELARSKY: Oh, that's, that, too, is a story by itself. Uh, they extended six months after the six months and then they sent letters that we had to go back. Somebody knew somebody in Washington D.C. from the Immigration Department and my father sang on the telephone to somebody who gave permission for another six months. Just singing on the telephone he made the right connection. He didn't even go there. And, so, it was a year and a half. Then, finally, I have the letter in my possession, where we had to go back in July of that year and a half later. Somebody knew, from Brigham Young University, now you have to understand we're Jewish, Russian Jews, and we're dealing with Utah Mormons.

SIGRIST: Yes, interesting combination.

BELARSKY: And they never saw a Jew in their lives, a Russian Jew. They were just wonderful, wonderful beyond means. By the way, I keep in touch with them. Fifty years later they gave me a reception there at Brigham Young University and they invited former students. That's another story.

SIGRIST: Wow. Did they supply housing for your father?

BELARSKY: Yeah, we had, we lived in a tourist, in a home for...students...

SIGRIST: No, keep going.

BELARSKY: And, uh, where am I, uh, we're back in...

SIGRIST: In Utah. Talk a little bit about what you're doing because you're, what, two or three years older now, right, than you were when you came?

BELARSKY: Oh, yes, in 1932 we moved to Los Angeles from New York and there I went to school. I went to...

SIGRIST: Were you musical at all?

BELARSKY: No, just piano.

SIGRIST: Your father make you take lessons?

BELARSKY: Oh, piano lessons, but I had a, somebody told me, "Wouldn't it be wonderful that you're going to accompany your father," and I got so scared I quit the piano.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) I bet.

BELARSKY: I quit the piano. That was the wrong thing to say to me. But I had the most interesting life in Los Angeles, in New York...

SIGRIST: Did you live in Los Angeles a long time?

BELARSKY: Four years until 1936.

SIGRIST: And your father was singing with...?

BELARSKY: He was singing at that time, he was teaching summertime in Utah and during the time he was singing with all the symphony orchestras, Los Angeles Symphony, at that time it was Arturo Toscanini, uh, Rosinski was the conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. And, uh...

SIGRIST: Did your mother like America?

BELARSKY: Oh my God, you couldn't mention Russia to her no how.

SIGRIST: How about your father?

BELARSKY: My father, too.

SIGRIST: They were very happy to be here.

BELARSKY: My father, too. Oh, they were such anti, anti-Russian.

SIGRIST: Did either of them ever go back?

BELARSKY: No.

SIGRIST: Never.

BELARSKY: My mother was always afraid for him to go back.

SIGRIST: So your father never saw his parents again.

BELARSKY: No, and he didn't even know, he died in 1975 and in 1980 his sister Eva, who lived with us, arrived in America.

SIGRIST: Wow.

BELARSKY: And he never knew that. She arrived with her two daughters and they all settled, I have a whole family in San Jose, California.

SIGRIST: I see.

BELARSKY: Now I, what I'm doing now, the last fifteen years that he died, I'm keeping him alive by having, I reissued some cassettes...

SIGRIST: Because you have all the rights to this stuff and...

BELARSKY: And I also have a scholarship, Sidor Belarsky Scholarship, at the Hebrew Arts Center in New York, it's near Lincoln Center, for two students to take up singing with a teacher, with a woman Machobenja who teaches at that Hebrew Arts Center.

SIGRIST: That's a wonderful way of keeping someone's memory alive.

BELARSKY: And so I keep that alive. And in the, in all the programs of the Merkin Hall you see "Sidor Belarsky Scholarship" which I, I'm so proud of. (she clears her throat) Excuse me. And plus the class and that's what I've been doing. Sometimes I have, oh, I made two tribute concerts at the Merkin for Sidor Belarsky tributes at the Merkin. And whatever I do now I do it to keep his memory alive. And his Yiddish, he made about twenty two albums Yiddish folk songs and he is the most well known Yiddish folk singer in America.

SIGRIST: Well, and you had some of those recordings...

BELARSKY: And I have some of them here which I want to leave for the museum and to leave at Ellis Island. And I want it to be continued to be remembered.

SIGRIST: Well, I think this is probably a good point to end this interview.

BELARSKY: And I want to thank you.

SIGRIST: Oh, well, thank you.

BELARSKY: Oh, this...

SIGRIST: What a great story.

BELARSKY: To me it's most traumatic experience of my life. I say with tears in my eyes I didn't sleep the whole night in anticipation of coming here,

SIGRIST: But it was easy, wasn't it?

BELARSKY: Very easy. Thank you, Paul, so much.

SIGRIST: Thank you. This is Paul Sigrist on behalf of the National Park Service and we're signing off with Isabel Belarsky.

**EI-10 INTERVIEW ADDITION WITH ISABEL BELARSKY**  
**INTERVIEW DATE: 2/24/1993**  
**RUNNING TIME: 25:00**  
**INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**  
**RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY**  
**INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO**  
**ORIGINAL INTERVIEW DATE: 11/27/1990**  
**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TODD SISLEY, 4/1993**  
**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 4/1993**

**RUSSIA, 1930**  
**AGE 9**

SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is  
is  
Wednesday, February 24th, 1993. I am at Ellis Island in the recording  
studio  
with Isabel Belarsky. Isabel Belarsky is our Ellis Island Interview Series  
Number 10. I had the pleasure of interviewing Isabel on November 27,  
1990.  
Well, we're back at it again, (Belarsky laughs) and Isabel's going to fill in  
for  
us some of the details about going to Cherbourg to get on the Aquitania  
and  
then details about the voyage and this is going to be added to her original  
interview. Welcome again Isabel.

BELARSKY: Thank you, thank you very much Paul.

SIGRIST: Let me begin in the traditional way by having you give me your name and your date of birth please.

BELARSKY: My date of birth! My name is Isabel Belarsky and I was born June 26, 1920  
in Odessa.

SIGRIST: Could you spell Odessa please?

BELARSKY: O-D-E-S-S-A. Odessa, Russia. It's in the Ukraine.

SIGRIST: And for the sake of the tape, I simply want to say that Isabel came with her mother and father from Russia in 1930 and you were nine, you had not yet turned ten.

BELARSKY: That's right.

SIGRIST: Okay.

BELARSKY: And we arrived February 8th, 1930. Actually, we came to Ellis Island the day  
after, February 9th. So it's sixty-three years.

SIGRIST: Yes, it's been a long time. Isabel, for our purposes, let's begin with you  
telling  
me about what you remember about your parents getting ready to go.  
What  
did your parents have to do to get ready to leave for America?

BELARSKY: Oh it was, it was exciting and nervous. My father was a singer. He had just

graduated the conservatory, Leningrad. We lived in Leningrad and we had

this visa to come to America for six months for him to be a professor of music at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

SIGRIST: Just say, for the sake of the tape, your father's name.

BELARSKY: My father's name, Sidor Belarsky.

SIGRIST: Who, of course, in America became very famous.

BELARSKY: Yes, quite famous. He sang with Toscanini in Fidelio. He was in different opera companies: Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, City Center. He opened up at City Center in 19, I think, '44.

SIGRIST: So he was offered this teaching position at Brigham Young.

BELARSKY: And so there we got a visa for six months and so, but we knew that we weren't going to go back. We felt, by all crook you know, we're, we're

going

to remain here, and it was very trying for his parents. He was a only son, he

had six sisters and so we got prepared to leave and we left Leningrad.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me anything about before you left Leningrad, and you were a kid

I realize. But do you remember any thing about the getting of the visas

and

where he may have had to go or what problems?

BELARSKY: Well, there were many problems because to get a visa at that time was very

difficult. It was only due to President Harris of Brigham Young University who

made all these arrangements. He went to the government and some how or

other they gave them permission. I think we waited about six months before

they gave this permission, only for six months. And we were on our way, and

the only thing that we took along with us was a little bit of clothing and a samovar. They told us, my father's uncle who paid for the passage on the Aquitania, that the only thing we had to bring was a samovar.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what a samovar is for us?

BELARSKY: A samovar is this brass urn, I guess, that you make tea in, and it has a whole

in the center where you put the coal in there, and it attaches to the wall, and

that's how it's heated up, and then you just have a little, you know turns like,

any coffee or...

SIGRIST: Spigot.

BELARSKY: Spigot. And that's a samovar, and I still have it. I have it at home. And we

left Leningrad, was very tearful for us with his parents still there and the sisters and some of the students from the Conservatory of Music and they were all saying, "Sidor, don't forget us and try, maybe we can come somehow or other." And we left Leningrad and we went on a train to Berlin.

We stopped in Warsaw where they examine, where we went through customs and almost everything was opened up to see if we we've smuggled

something in. And we the only thing we had was a samovar and a little suitcase with a little bit of clothing. And we arrived in Berlin, and my father remembered that we were there many years when I was about two years old

he, we were there. And so we took a cab to a pension. But by this time, he

had no money because the government only allowed us ten dollars, ten American dollars. And in Warsaw, they wanted that money to crate the samovar, because he was just carrying it around in his hand. So he had to

pay ten dollars, so when we came to Berlin, we had no money but he took a cab to this pension that we were there when I was a little girl, and it was different people but they let us in and then he sent a telegram to New York to his uncle Benjamin Brown, and he got the money to us and that's how we stayed in Berlin for a little while, and then we took a train to Paris.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what the time frame of all this is. How long did it go

say from Leningrad to Warsaw?

BELARSKY: The Leningrad to Warsaw, we just, maybe a day. And in Warsaw we just stopped there to have our things checked, and on another train we went to Berlin.

SIGRIST: So you changed trains in Warsaw.

BELARSKY: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me, from Warsaw to Berlin was probably only a day too?

BELARSKY: Also, only a day.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories of what the inside of the train looked like, or anything like that?

BELARSKY: Oh yes, oh my goodness!

SIGRIST: Can you tell me some things about that?

BELARSKY: The trains I remember so well because at one time when we left a small town

in the Ukraine going to Leningrad, the train was derailed and a couple of hundred people were killed. Now the train in Russia were, you have the

two,

the two benches and two benches on top where people sleep on top too,

and

a little bench near the window, and that's where I used to sleep. And

when

we had that train wreck, I was lucky. I fell under the seat so all the  
baggage  
fell on top of us, but I, I was safe because I sort of slid under this little seat.

SIGRIST: The train wreck was not on this trip to Berlin? This was before.

BELARSKY: No, no. This train wreck was before. Through the woods of the Ukraine  
going to Leningrad. But going from Leningrad to Berlin is the same type of  
a

train where there's, you know, people sit on both sides and there's, above  
there's also where people can sleep, and what they do usually in Russia,  
they

stop at a station and people run out and get hot water for the samovar.

Most

people carry the samovar with them, and they drink tea. They love tea,  
tchai,

and so they, at different station they have people bringing the hot water  
into

your samovar and that's how they travelled.

SIGRIST: Very much part of the Russian Culture.

BELARSKY: That's the Russian way. We left Berlin, really didn't stay there too long,  
maybe a week or so, and we came to Paris.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories of that week in Berlin, something that you did  
maybe?

BELARSKY: Yes, very much so. Berlin was already feeling the war coming on, and we

were not liked, being Jewish and being Russian. It was a bad combination for the Germans. It was ready, you felt something was in the air, because

I

remember we spent New Year's Eve, 1930 New Year's Eve in Berlin, and

we

were invited someplace, I don't recall where, probably my father had some friends there, and he asked directions and they were, they just didn't even want to give us those directions. They were quite arrogant about it. So

we

had a feeling something was happening, but didn't realize till a few years later what did really happen. And that's my recollection of being in Berlin, being a beautiful city. Very clean. Not a spot, you know the Germans are very clean people.

SIGRIST: Did you know any German as a kid? I'm sure your father probably knew some.

BELARSKY: I didn't know any German, no. We spoke Russian to each other. My father

knew it because it's so similar to Jewish.

SIGRIST: Well, he probably had to sing in German at some point.

BELARSKY: Oh, he sang in every language. So he understood. But I didn't know it and

we were just the three of us together. We were very close, being an only child, so we were very close together. And when we arrived in Paris, we stayed almost a month in Paris.

SIGRIST: Oh, so you probably have quite a few recollections of Paris.

BELARSKY: Oh yes, of Paris I have a lot of recollections. First of all, we had no papers to

remain in Paris. So any time we would see a policeman, we would hide.

My

father was afraid of being stopped because the passport didn't have that

we,

that we could stay in Paris. But we had relatives, and we stayed with

those

relatives. And you know in Paris in those years, when you enter an apartment, you have to show your passport or your name to the

concierge,

and it was always frightening that she would look, it was a woman there, would look at the passport that said we are not allowed to stay there. But

my

father was very young and he felt that this is a chance of a lifetime. How

not

to take a chance if you're in Paris, not to stay there. So this was the

month of

January actually. The January of 1930 that we were in Paris. And we

stayed

with relatives who were, well in those days, poor. They were one day, the people were fixing furs, and they had the machine their apartment. The

three

of us could not stay in the same apartment so I stayed with these people 'cause they had a little girl my age, Lucy, and my mother and father stayed with another relative. Very poor. We had to walk up to the, the elevators didn't work. They might have gone one way but, had to walk down or walk

up.

These were very old buildings. Just about water used to drip on walls.

They

were old and tiny little rooms and quite poor. I'm sure very poor. Even to

my

eyes as a child, it was poor. We had to go in the downstairs in the yard to

go

to the bathroom, and there was no bathtub. I think you also had to go out

and

community. But as a child, I enjoyed the whole feeling 'cause I had this

little

friend, my cousin, to stay with.

SIGRIST: Were you looking forward to going to America?

BELARSKY: I was happy in my surroundings in Leningrad. Did I look forward? I don't

know. As a child, I looked, everything was an adventure for me. Even

now,

everything, coming here is an adventure, and I like adventure. So I didn't know what to expect, but I certainly wasn't that happy about it.

SIGRIST: So you stayed in Paris a month.

BELARSKY: A month, and then we were ready. The tickets arrived for Cherbourg, in

Cherbourg. We took a little boat like here coming to Ellis Island, to the,

this

big beautiful boat of Aquitania.

SIGRIST: Did you, had you booked passage on the Aquitania or had your uncle

booked it?

BELARSKY: My uncle arranged that.

SIGRIST: Did he do that when you were still in Russia and it was a matter of getting to

Cherbourg in time for the boat to leave?

BELARSKY: Yes, that's all.

SIGRIST: I see.

BELARSKY: We just had to be there. He took care of everything and the tickets were second class, which is a very nice way for immigrants to come. It was a beautiful, beautiful boat. I remember it very well. Of course the passage was

very rough. It was the week of February. I don't know how long it took at that

time, maybe seven days, you know in those days. So let's say we left February 1st and came February 8th, so it was a long trip. And it was a tough trip because I knew later that they wrote about it in New York that

the

boat was sinking, it was such a bad flight. Not flight.

SIGRIST: Voyage.

BELARSKY: Voyage. Some people never left their room because it was shaking so. They couldn't get into the dining salon because it was just, they were sick through the whole trip. We saw some people when we came in

Cherbourg

and we never saw them when they arrived in New York.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what your accommodations were like on the boat?

BELARSKY: The accommodations as far as I can remember, it was just the three of us, and it was most likely, you know, what do they have on the boat? The bunks,

for the three of us. And it was enough , it was for ourselves, we didn't have

to, in my eyes, it was grand, it was just grand. And then going to the dining

room with also, beautiful and to, we had a, we met a man in Cherbourg, an

American business man, and he sort of took care of us through the trip.

He

showed us how to get around and what to eat, and it was the first time we saw bananas and how to eat a banana. You have to understand that in Russia we didn't have any of those things. Even a fruit, it was, you had to

be

sick to have an orange. (she laughs) I don't think I ever saw an orange.

We

had apples. In the Ukraine, there were a lot of them. And we had watermelon.

SIGRIST: I remember your watermelon stories. (he laughs)

BELARSKY: Yeah, the watermelon stories, where my grandfather had watermelon.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the dining room?

BELARSKY: It was a large dining room with many tables, some long and we were sitting together with this man, Seltzer. But most of the time it was empty because the people were just too sick to get to eat. And then to get fresh air we would go out on the deck to get fresh because they told us that's the best place not to get sick after you eat. And then they had a beautiful salon where my father gave a concert and it's just so too bad that never thought of in the future he got a little award for singing. It must have been something special. And he sang a full concert to the people in the second class and maybe they even brought him up to the first class. I don't remember. But I remember him singing. He was a big hit and that same salon with beautiful couches and lounges and tables and little bit like a stage where he sang and the grand piano. When we arrived in New York on February 8th and we were supposed to have, be met by this uncle Benjamin Brown and he was not at the deck to meet us and so they wouldn't let us out, and we waited for somebody to get us out, and we arrived about 12:30, and little by little everybody left the boat and just the three of us remained there, waiting in the lounge. They told us to wait in the lounge. And it was hours and hours and hours. It wasn't until two 'o clock in the morning when this American businessman came up to tell us what had happened and why,

where Benjamin Brown was in Los Angeles marrying off his daughter. And he gave the money, because you had to pay I think five hundred dollar bond to get us off. He gave the money to his sister and the sister was looking for a room for us and a car hit her and she, (she laughs) she broke a, she was in the hospital. So then the money went to another man and he had an appendix attack and he was in the hospital too. So there was nobody to meet us. And when we were sitting in this beautiful salon on the Aquitania, these two men came up to tell us that, what had happened and not to worry, we'll sleep over and in the morning they were going to take us by a little boat to Ellis Island. And that's how we arrived February 9th.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you a few, we have ten minutes left, a few specific questions about the boat. Do you remember any interaction between the passengers and the crew?

BELARSKY: No.

SIGRIST: Or the captain?

BELARSKY: No. I would have been too young to have....

SIGRIST: Do you remember any kind of lifeboat drill of some sort?

BELARSKY: Yes, I'm sure, I'm sure, because I remember being on the deck very many times. Of course. You have to understand that we were the only, I think there was no immigration at that time, and being in the second class, we didn't go

with immigrants, so to speak. So, there very few people that spoke our language, spoke Russian. And there were very few people that even spoke Yiddish, Jewish at that time, so that we were alone, and we didn't have too much interaction with the other people, as far as I remember. But being on the deck and, I'm sure that we went through the drills. I'm sure of that.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you kind of a personal question and maybe you can answer for your father more than for you 'cause you were a kid. Because of that circumstance, because you did feel alienated to a certain extent 'cause you were different than the other second class passengers, did this make you feel like you didn't belong there, or I mean was he, did he feel any discomfort because of that situation?

BELARSKY: Oh no. My father never felt discomfort at any situation. He went through, living in Russia you don't feel any (she laughs) discomfort and especially he  
was young and he was a student all his life and he was in a special unique way that he was a young father because he, there was about twenty years difference of our age so that he about twenty-one when I was born or twenty, so he was a young fellow and he took things in a very nice way and then he had this experience of singing in the opera in Leningrad the...

SIGRIST: He could make friends anywhere.

BELARSKY: Oh, he could be friends, he used to bring all kinds of strangers to our house.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you this. Do you remember as a little girl perhaps any kind of

organized activities on the boat? Perhaps you mentioned, of course your father performed, but can, perhaps organized games or something that was done for the children?

BELARSKY: I don't believe so. I don't believe so. I don't believe that, I was a child. At the

age of nine, I don't think I was a child. I went through too many things. Living in Leningrad, we lived in one room. There were six rooms and we were six families, five families and us. I was the only child, but I was always living with grown ups. I don't believe. Now I feel like a child, (she laughs) but at that time I didn't feel as a child would have felt. First of all, I was very sensitive to the whole situation of leaving the country, of leaving my few friends and living in this atmosphere where I was the only child. I was very close to the other people that lived in the apartment. Very close. They used to take me every place and I was always with grown- ups. I didn't have a so called normal childhood. So I don't believe that on the Aquitania I would, they would let me have some kind of activities with other children. I don't even believe, I don't remember any children on the Aquitania at that time.

SIGRIST: Well, and of course, because of your particular circumstance, you know feeling somewhat isolated on the boat, you may not have participated even if they had something.

BELARSKY: Without a language, you know, only Russian because Aquitania, I'm sure that

they had people that spoke French or English of course or German. But we were together, and second of all, it was such a rough trip that everybody stayed in their little cabin most of the time. They just went out

to eat if they could without getting sick, and...

SIGRIST: Did you get sick?

BELARSKY: No. I think my mo..I don't think my mother ever left her room. My father and I

were out to eat, outside and a lot of times, mostly outside, we would take a chair on the deck and cover ourselves up and you know, and that way we got the air and a walk through by ourselves. But it was a grand, beautiful ship, beautifully laid out, and I recall vividly that it was a beautiful ship especially because we were on the second class. I don't know how'd it be down below, and I recall I believe that they let us into the first class. Usually they don't but maybe because of my father's singing, they allowed us. It was also very, very beautiful, naturally it was very beautiful.

SIGRIST: Well, to be in a surrounding like this after, you know, your trip from Leningrad

was less than pleasant. The entire trip...

BELARSKY: Yeah, oh it was, and to leave Leningrad, to leave where we had to go and to

pay to taking a bath. And here we are, they had a bath in different, in a different room, not in our cabin, but outside. And you know, it was, it was so thrilling to be on that.

SIGRIST: Was there anything you didn't like about the boat?

BELARSKY: No. I loved the whole, I loved that boat. I love boats. Years ago, I went on the

Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth II, to Cherbourg, when I was a grown-up

woman and they were beautiful.

SIGRIST: Did it bring back memories of when you were a kid?

BELARSKY: Yes, it certainly did. I wasn't sick at that time and I went there with my husband. It was a beautiful trip. It was a different, a different story altogether.

SIGRIST: That will be a different interview someday.

BELARSKY: Yes.

SIGRIST: Isabel, I want to thank you very much. You've been very helpful and for coming out to Ellis Island again, two years plus later, and telling us about the Aquitania. I appreciate that.

BELARSKY: Oh, I loved it. Thank you very much for calling.

SIGRIST: Oh, you're welcome.

BELARSKY: Thank you.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Isabel Belarsky with the extension of Ellis

Island Interview Number 10. Today is February 24th, 1993.

EI-10/BELARSKY

END OF INTERVIEW