

EI-108

ANNA WOLTER POWELL

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 9/1993

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GERMANY, 1912 PORT: HAMBURG

AGE 16

SHIP: NOT RECALLED RESIDENCES: GERMANY: OTTERNDORF
US: BROOKLYN, NY

LEVINE: I'm here today with Anna Powell at the Laurelton Village Health Care Center in Brick, New Jersey. It's October 11th, I'm Janet Levine representing the National Park Service. Anna came from Germany in 1912 at the age of sixteen. I'm very happy to be here with you and I hope you'll enjoy talking with me about your experience in coming to America.

POWELL: Well, it's not funny to advertise that. I had to work mighty hard I'll tell you from about six in the morning until sometimes midnight. So if you think that's a, nobody would believe it. Nobody, they say, "She was lazy, there's something the matter with her."

LEVINE: No, I don't think so. I think it's important for people to know what life was like for you as you lived in Germany and then when you came here. Anna, why don't we start by you telling me your birth date.

POWELL: Huh?

LEVINE: What was your birth date?

POWELL: Valentine's Day.

LEVINE: Oh, February 14th. What year?

POWELL: 1896.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. And where were you born? What was the name of the town?

POWELL: Oh, it was a little bitty village. Half a dozen people.

LEVINE: Half a dozen?

POWELL: There weren't that many people, there at all. And I was born right on the coast of the North Sea. If I couldn't sleep I'd listen to the waves hitting the breakwater.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And can you remember hearing that now? You can remember hearing that.

POWELL: I can hear that in my sleep. I wake up sometimes, where am I? Oh, I know I'm in bed.

LEVINE: Would you remember the name of that little village where you lived?

POWELL: Well, it was West End, they called it, West End.

LEVINE: West End. And by the North Sea.

POWELL: And the town was O-T-T-E-R-N-D-O-R-F. So you could get that.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay, now, could you describe that town? What was it like there?

POWELL: What was it like? It was hard work, I'll tell you that!

LEVINE: Now, did you live there with your family?

POWELL: I lived there with my father and mother and sister and brother.

LEVINE: And what was your father's name?

POWELL: Well, it was Henry if you translate that to the English.

LEVINE: Henry. And what was his last name? What was your maiden name?

POWELL: W-O-L-T-E-R.

LEVINE: W-O-L-T . . .

POWELL: E-R.

LEVINE: E-R. And how about your mother? What was her name?

POWELL: Well . . .

LEVINE: Her first name.

POWELL: Her birth name was N-A-N-G-E-L.

LEVINE: Okay. Nangel. And what was her maiden name. Do you remember her maiden name?

POWELL: That was her maiden name.

LEVINE: Oh. And what was her first name?

POWELL: Eliesa.

LEVINE: Eliesa.

POWELL: Yeah. But I wouldn't want that published because there's someone that's still alive, it would hurt, so you can't publish it.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, how about your brother? You had one

brother and one sister?

POWELL: I had two brothers.

LEVINE: Oh, two brothers. And you were the only girl?

POWELL: No, there were four girls.

LEVINE: Two boys and four girls. Uh-huh. And do you remember the house that you lived in there?

POWELL: Do I remember the house? Oh, (?). (she is moved)

LEVINE: Anna, maybe we should simply go on to when you decided to leave Germany?

POWELL: Well, I decided a long time ago I couldn't get anywhere except hard work, and nobody would want nothing for it. And I was not permitted to read the newspaper. I was sixteen, but I was not allowed to read the newspaper. So where I was working there was a, what they call the house man. And he was sound asleep, had the newspaper on his belly. I just glanced over there. I saw the ad, "Wanted in America, girls for housework." So I got up quietly, went to my father and told him I wanted to see a certain woman in town. And he said, "What for?" I said, "I'll tell

you on the way." And my mother, she was not my right mother, she had raised me, she kind of grinned, of course. If I got out of the way, she'd be happy. So that . . .

LEVINE: Why were you not allowed to read the newspaper?

POWELL: There were a lot of restrictions as a child when you were born and brought up there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you weren't allowed the newspaper. And you saw an ad . . .

POWELL: I saw the ad, "Wanted in America, girls for housework." So I thought how I'm going to go. And, of course, Mother Eliesa came along. She was not my right mother. And Father said, "For the case of the family, call her Mother Eliesa." So that was it.

LEVINE: Well, then, how did you go about getting to America to get this job that you saw advertised?

POWELL: I told the woman that had advertised as, she said, "Would you have any money to travel?" I said, "No. I haven't anything." So the money was sent.

LEVINE: Who sent the money to you?

POWELL: The woman that I was to work for.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh. Now, did you or someone else write to that woman and ask her to send the money for you?

POWELL: My, I'll call her (?). Of course, she was glad to get rid of me.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. So she wrote to the woman and the woman sent the money for your passage.

POWELL: No. I had to go and pay it off, as . . .

LEVINE: You worked it off after you got there. Now, can you remember when you were leaving Germany what did you do? Where did you have to go?

POWELL: I had to go to, right on the estuary of the Elbe River. That's it, where the steamer would pick me up.

LEVINE: And do you remember the name of that steamer?

POWELL: (she pauses) Oh, gee. That's gone with the wind.
(they laugh)

LEVINE: That's okay. When you were getting on the steamer, what were you thinking? Do you remember what you were thinking?

POWELL: I wondered how much work I'd have to do.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Were you happy to be leaving Germany then?

POWELL: Well, I was happy to get somewhere else from where I, the work I, I worked in the fields from morning till night. It wasn't funny.

LEVINE: No. So you wanted to get away and maybe have a better life.

POWELL: I wanted to see if I couldn't find something better, that's all.

LEVINE: So when you got on the ship, were you travelling with anybody or were you by yourself?

POWELL: No, I was alone.

LEVINE: You were alone, and you were sixteen years old.

POWELL: Sixteen. You had to be sixteen.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, how did you feel? Did you feel afraid, or did you . . .

POWELL: No. I had no sense of fear yet. Oh, (?) over me. I left the hard time behind, and I was hoping for better days. That's all that was in my mind.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, what was the trip like?

POWELL: It was just a hundred-passenger launch, a little bit of a tub, they called it.

LEVINE: A tub. And what were your accommodations? Do you remember where you slept?

POWELL: Yeah. I slept in the third, in the third deck in a room.

LEVINE: And were there other people in that room?

POWELL: No, I was alone.

LEVINE: You had a room all by yourself.

POWELL: I had requested my own room and bed. I didn't want anybody in the room with me. I got that much out of it.

LEVINE: Okay. And so you were in a room by yourself. Now, how about food?

POWELL: Whatever they set before you ate, you didn't ask questions about the food.

LEVINE: What do you remember about that trip? What stands out

in your mind about the trip?

POWELL: Well, what I remember about that ship was, I saw the Titanic. Oh, it was beautiful. It was out of this world. (she is moved) And I said to the First Officer, see, I was used to standing up, I said to the First Officer, "Oh," I said, "what a beautiful ship." He said, "Yes," he said, "it is." He said, "There are two of them like that." He said, "The Titanic and the Olympic." You don't ask questions. You keep your mouth shut. It's just that I asked him, because he knew this. So I, (she is moved) I went on. I had to go by train up to Hamburg and then come back by ship to the North Sea. It is nice to recall.

LEVINE: It is naturally cold?

POWELL: I said it is nice to recall those . . .

LEVINE: Oh, it is nice, uh-huh. Uh-huh, good.

POWELL: So don't print it. I don't want to see it.

LEVINE: Okay, okay. Okay, well, do you remember anything else about being aboard the ship?

POWELL: Well, there was an elderly woman and she was

accompanying her younger sister. Her sister was my age. So the two of us palled together aboard ship.

LEVINE: Do you remember coming into the New York Harbor?

POWELL: By that time you're closed in because you're being interviewed to leave. You don't see anything.

LEVINE: Oh, because of the mist and the fog?

POWELL: No! Because, after all, there were too many to be interviewed, so there was one, two, three . . .

LEVINE: Oh, you mean you, you mean, when you were processed to be able to come into the country.

POWELL: Yeah.

LEVINE: It was very quick.

POWELL: I was, I had a medical examination and I said to myself that they must be wanting to have a piece of my brain. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Well, now, was this on the ship, or was this after you got to Ellis Island?

POWELL: No, after I, I was still on the ship.

LEVINE: And they examined you on the ship.

POWELL: Yeah.

LEVINE: And was it a very thorough examination?

POWELL: Huh?

LEVINE: Did they examine you a lot?

POWELL: Oh, they stripped you almost naked.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then when you got to Ellis Island, can you remember . . .

POWELL: You see, the people didn't show up that were supposed to, where we were supposed to go. They didn't get there. So because you're on their hands they want to get rid of you, so they pushed me into Ellis Island.

LEVINE: I see. The people who were going to meet your ship didn't show up, so you went to Ellis Island.

POWELL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, what was Ellis Island like? What was your first impression when you went there?

POWELL: The first impression was the enormous hall, the

building. And then the next thing I sat on the seat.
And I remember that. (?) So I tell you, it wasn't
funny.

LEVINE: No. How long did you stay at Ellis Island? How many
days were you staying at Ellis Island?

POWELL: Oh, I was only there from, let me see, get there about
eleven, and around five o'clock they picked me up.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you never slept there.

POWELL: No, thank Heaven. I think the bed bugs would have
walked away with me.

LEVINE: Where did you see the bed bugs?

POWELL: Huh?

POWELL: Where were the bed bugs?

POWELL: The bed bugs were right along the back of the seat,
along the seat.

LEVINE: And then were you, did you eat food there?

POWELL: Huh?

LEVINE: Did you eat at Ellis Island? Were you fed there?

POWELL: No.

LEVINE: No.

POWELL: I had nothing from the time I left my parents' home until the next morning. But I was too, you know . . .

LEVINE: Nervous.

POWELL: Upset. I couldn't eat.

LEVINE: Well, then, what happened? When were you met? You were met at five o'clock in the evening. Who met you then?

POWELL: The people that were supposed to come. They had misunderstood the time.

LEVINE: And these were the people you were going to work for?

POWELL: I was going to work there, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was that like? How did you, can you recall the meeting with those people that you had come to work for?

POWELL: No, I had never heard of them or anything. But I knew I had to have a change. I knew I was not going to be able to go on in Germany the way I had. Fifteen cows,

so I didn't milk them all. They were not all . . .

LEVINE: You milked some of them.

POWELL: But I had to milk, and I was nine years old when I milked the first one.

LEVINE: So what was, can you describe the person who met you, who you then worked for?

POWELL: Well, they just plain ordinary Germans that had worked themselves up. That's all. There's nothing extra about them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Were they good to you?

POWELL: Huh?

LEVINE: Were they good to you?

POWELL: Well, I was just a greenhorn, so, I don't know.

LEVINE: So where did you go then? Where did you go to live? Where did they live.

POWELL: In Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Do you remember your first impressions of the United States when you got off the boat and you were going?

Do you remember what you thought about America when you got off the boat?

POWELL: You couldn't because by the time I was finished I was too tired and too sick even to notice what was going on. It was not until I think the third day I really woke up to the fact that I was somewhere else.

LEVINE: I see. And then do you remember, what surprised you about this country? Did you, was there anything that particularly struck you as different from . . .

POWELL: No. It's just work, work, work.

LEVINE: So you had to work hard here, too.

POWELL: I earned my salt. And my mother, she was not really, my mother died when I was two years old, but she was glad to get rid of me. She had, on impulse she picked me up and carried me with her to her place, and then she had her own children and I was in the way. That's . . .

LEVINE: So that was difficult for you.

POWELL: Well, I came out of it.

LEVINE: Good. Well, now, did you, were you living mostly

among German people when you were living in Brooklyn?

POWELL: Yeah. First I was a servant, and then I met a, one of the women who had worked for this particular party, a German woman, and she said, "I know a good place for you. She needs somebody to help her." And she said, "She can't find anybody that really suit herself." So I went there, and I sat for one solid hour in a bentwood rocking chair, and the two women jabber, jabber, jabber. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Now, this was after you were working for the person that you came here to work for, and then somebody suggested another place?

POWELL: No. The people were supposed to pick me up didn't show up at all.

LEVINE: Oh, they never showed up. I see. Well, then, so then who came for you?

POWELL: Nobody came for me. I fought my way out of a fog.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. And you went to Brooklyn. Who did you go to Brooklyn with?

POWELL: These people that picked me up. They lived in

Brooklyn in the Bay Ridge section.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how did you know those people?

POWELL: I didn't know them!

LEVINE: You didn't know them.

POWELL: When you're like that, you go.

LEVINE: They said they would take you to Brooklyn . . .

POWELL: They took me in and first thing was I had to scrub the bathroom floor. And then, oh, then, forget it. I don't want to go over that. (she is moved)

LEVINE: Okay. So then, once you got to Brooklyn you were living among other German people.

POWELL: Oh, yeah, sure.

LEVINE: Did you make friends there?

POWELL: Huh?

LEVINE: Did you make friends with other German people?

POWELL: No, no.

LEVINE: No. Well, how did you learn English?

POWELL: Huh?

LEVINE: How did you learn English?

POWELL: How did I learn English? By listening, keeping my eyes and ears open.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you never went to school.

POWELL: I tried. No, I tried and (?). The war broke out, so schools were closed. No, I worked. Nobody can say I didn't earn my salt.

LEVINE: Then you, how did you meet your husband?

POWELL: Huh?

LEVINE: How did you meet your husband?

POWELL: Oh, that was not until years later.

LEVINE: How old were you when you met him?

POWELL: I was in the thirties.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. And was he also from Germany?

POWELL: No. He was strictly an American, and he was lonely, the same as I was. So I don't know how it came about, anyway. He, I met him just, you know, working around.

I met him, we talked to each other a couple of times, and I was then working for his aunt.

LEVINE: Oh, you were working for his aunt. You were doing housework for his aunt?

POWELL: Yes. I was there, I was with her for twenty-one years.

LEVINE: Oh, wow. So did you stay working with her, then, after you married your husband?

POWELL: No.

LEVINE: No. Then you stopped.

POWELL: No. It was over with. She died and that was the end of it.

LEVINE: I see, I see. So then did you have children?

POWELL: No, no. My husband was a Marine engineer, so he said to me, "Anna, I've got a five weeks' trip to make it to England." And he said, "When I come back I think we had better get married." So I said, "Well, if you think so, Jim." I didn't say anything more.

LEVINE: Were you happy about marrying him?

POWELL: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And did you have . . .

POWELL: Those were the happiest years I had.

LEVINE: Good. Did you have, did you then stop working, or did you find another job, or . . .

POWELL: No, I was, I had to, there were people that wanted me. They wanted me to help them, so I pitched in wherever I was asked. After all, I was used to working, so.

LEVINE: Let me just ask you this last question. Are you happy that you came to the United States?

POWELL: Huh?

LEVINE: Are you happy that you made the decision to come here?

POWELL: Oh, I wouldn't have made it if I hadn't thought I'd be happy. No, I, I knew I was changing to a different life, that's all.

LEVINE: And this life was better than the one that you left.

POWELL: I met this lady, and I lived with her for twenty-one years until she passed on. About that time, I had met my husband. He was a nephew of hers. And he said to

me, "Anna, I have a five weeks' trip to make to England." He said, "When I come back, I think we had better get married." So I looked at him, I said, "Well, if you say so, Jim." That's the whole thing.

LEVINE: Well, that's a good point to end on, and I thank you very much, Anna, for talking with me.

POWELL: You're welcome. But there are a lot of things in there that I don't want printed because there are still people that remember.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, having spoken with Anna Powell. Thanks.