

EI-1296
FAY FASS
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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: INES JIMBO
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: ALECIA BARBOUR AND IRV SILBERG

POLAND, 1924
AGE: 8

SHIP:
PORT:
RESIDENCES:
? POLAND: PULTUSK
? US: NEW YORK, NY; GREAT NECK, LI, NY

LEVINE: Today is December the 3rd, the year 2003. I'm here at the Atria Residences in Great Neck, Long Island with Fay Fass. Who was born Fanny Meltzer, in Poland, the town was Pultusk.

FASS: Correct [Laughs].

LEVINE And she came here when she was eight years of age, in 1924, the end of 1924?

FASS: 19 ---- that's correct

LEVINE: Okay. And at the time of this interview Mrs. Fass is eighty-seven years of age and the interview is also being video taped and Holden

LEEDS: Leeds

LEVINE: Leeds is doing, is the videographer, who is here with us. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay if you could say your name, as it would have appeared on the ship's manifest.

FASS: It would be Feige Melzarsh.

LEVINE: How do you spell Melzarsh?

FASS: Well, with the end, it's M-E-L. It's probably Z-A-R-S-H

LEVINE: Okay.

FASS: Or C-H, on that order.

LEVINE: Okay. And when you arrived at this country who did you come here with.

FASS: I came with my mother, and my brother, and my self. And we came to see our father who had been here for previously two or three years before.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What was your fathers' name?

FASS: Herman

LEVINE: Herman. And he -- he came earlier.

FASS: Right.

LEVINE: And what did he do? What did he do in Poland? And what did he do when he came here, do you know? [Clears throat]

FASS: In Poland, he had a little store where he fixed bicycles. When he came to America, he went into the Singer sewing machine fixing and hopped around from where ever they gave him a job. Saved up a little bit of money and, naturally, like all the good husbands sent for the family.

LEVINE: Do you remember your father? [Clears throat]

FASS: Yes.

LEVINE: From Poland?

FASS: No.

LEVINE: Before he left?

FASS: No. I didn't know him at all from Poland.

LEVINE: Okay.

FASS: I don't recall him at all. But when I came here we had a number of years together.

LEVINE: Wonderful. And your mother what was her name?

FASS: Ida. Khaya.

LEVINE: H--

FASS: When she came here?

LEVINE: Yeah.

FASS: She must have been in her thirties --- mid thirties probably. I don't recall exactly.

LEVINE: Okay. And her maiden name?

FASS: Was Wenger.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

FASS: W-E-N-G-E-R.

LEVINE: Okay. Now when you think back to those first eight years when you were in Poland, how do you remember your mother? What was her temperament, what was her personality? Can you think of --?

FASS: Yes. My mother was a liberal, quite advanced, very well read, an exceptional women in that respect. Because she did not abide by the religious methods completely, but she saw the world through a larger --- a larger element. She also traveled to Warsaw a good deal on business to bring back parts of -- for the bicycle shop that my father was handling. And when he left, she carried on a little bit for him --- and that's how we lived.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How--- do you know how your mother came by her liberal views? I mean, was there, was she an educated woman at that time?

FASS: Yes, Yes. She came from the town of Serock.

LEVINE: Can you spell that?

FASS: And don't ask me how to spell that.

LEVINE: Okay [Laughs], all right.

FASS: Her father was a well-read man and he instilled it in her. And so she, she just had the ability to pick up things and was always very liberal and very more advanced than some of the other girls. But of course the -- the match-making came and from Pultusk to Serock and they brought a very nice young man but simple and he really never lived up to her abilities

LEVINE: Um-hmmm. Uh-hmmm.

FASS: But he was a very fine, young man.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

FASS: And what else can I tell you.

LEVINE: Yeah. That's great. Okay, so can you think of any experience with your mother as a child before you came to this country -- in Poland -- that kind of expresses how she was or what kind of child you were or your relationship at all?

FASS: I think I was a very a simple child because my brother out shown [sic] me. He was the town virtuoso as a violinist

LEVINE: Really..

FASS: Yes..

LEVINE: And he was older?

FASS: He was six years older than I was. And they were giving him lessons -- coming from Warsaw to give him lessons and he was a talented, terrific talent. So my mother seemed to have leaned all her abilities and all her ---- I wouldn't say love, I had love also.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FASS: But all her endeavors to advance him, and so I was a simple little girl -- six years younger --- and sort of left on the side line for grandma and grandpa to look after me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you had grandparents in - in --

FASS: Yes.

LEVINE: in Pultusk?

FASS: Yes. That was on the father's side, mother and father.

LEVINE: And can you think of --- when you think of your grandparents, are there any experience that pop to mind about grandmother....

FASS: My grandmother was a simple soul. My grandfather could play any instrument that he picked up.

LEVINE: Ah, so that's where your brother..

FASS: He had the ability, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Wonderful, do you know, so your father was here he earned enough money to send for you...

FASS: Yes.

LEVINE: And your mother and brother. And do, did you, do you remember leaving home?

FASS: Oh yes.

LEVINE: How you felt and what it was like for you?

FASS: Oh, naturally, as a child, I cried bitterly --- leaving grandma, and grandpa who adored every little child. We came to Warsaw to

stop over. I did have an uncle there and he was what we call a feldsher. A feldsher actually means a homemade doctor.

LEVIN: Ah, so what did he do?

FASS: [superposed] In other words ----- he lived in Warsaw.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what...

FASS: So we stayed with him and that is when they found that I had trachoma. I don't know whether you know what it is.

LEVINE Why don't you say anything about that that you can recall.

FASS: Trachoma is actually an extremely contagious disease, which is --- involves around getting little blisters on the lids of your eyes, which can turn to being blind if left neglected. But it's also so contagious that should you use a handkerchief or a tissue and, and someone else pick it up they can contract it. It had to be removed by surgery and this feldsher, so called doctor - uncle --- he was one that did it for me. I was very successful, but unfortunately there were many, many children that contagious and they weren't very successful. And -- of course-- America would not let them come in.

LEVINE: That's right. Can you say anything about your uncle and what he did and, and how it was for you in Warsaw when you were having this treatment for your trachoma.

FASS: Not particularly. He -- he was a little better circumstances than we were in Pultusk ---- because living in Warsaw he was more prominent and more well advanced financially. And we were only there for few days.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

FASS: Just as long I had to recover.

LEVINE: I see.

FASS: And be sure that the boat would let me go on.

LEVINE: Now, were, did do you have any examinations prior to leaving?

FASS: Well, yes. Physical examination, what kind exactly I don't remember. But it was just a physical examination.

LEVINE: I see.

FASS: They were very particular at that time ----- who they were letting in.

LEVINE Yes. Okay. So then you left Warsaw, do you remember the trip to the port?

FASS: No, no.

LEVINE Do you remember the passage?

FASS: Yes. Very, very vividly. It was a pretty uncomfortable passage. Steerage wasn't comfortable for anyone [Laughs]. Looking up and seeing First Class was looking at another world.

LEVINE: Can you describe Steerage and First Class as much as you can remember?

FASS: No. We stood on the --- in the steerage --- which was the third class, and we looked up and we would see all these people walking by and looking so leisurely and so well groomed. And we were pretty well shoddied [sic]. And it was another world to us.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FASS: Then we didn't --- I, personally, did not have a very good trip. My brother contact ---- contacted [sic] ---- it was some sort of a disease of the skin. And so they kept him in the infirmary for practically the entire passage. And my mother would sit there day in and day out and I was left with very nice, lovely people who would look after me. And I wandered around and looked at another world and I was the healthy one. [Laughs]

LEVINE Were you excited to be coming to this country or did, can you say...

FASS: Oh yes, yes.

LEVINE anything about how you felt?

FASS: Excited, of course. As a child, it was told to me that it's another world. It's another street --- golden paved street and so forth. So that I was very excited. I kept looking forward. And then we arrived it --- the boat docked. And -- of course -- everyone went out to see the Statue of Liberty. When the boat docked, they allowed people --- fathers or relatives --- to come over with a little boat, a little jitney. What do they call them?

LEVINE: Um Hm.

FASS: And they hauled up packages to us --- gifts. And my father included an orange and a grapefruit, a piece of candy, a piece of cake and that was hauled up to us and it was a very, very exciting moment.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh, and...

FASS: And from there, of course, we docked in Ellis Island.

LEVINE And what do you remember, as much detail as you can remember, about Ellis Island and your experience there.

FASS: Ellis Island to me at that time looked like a horse's stall for every family. Each one got a section to be in. And to me it looked like what I would see in Europe --- the horses being put into a stall. So the three of us had a section, some other families another section. Soon as possible we were given ---- I believe it was a lye soap, that yellow, hard soap that they use for scrubbing ---- and we had to take showers. After that it was all a matter of my mother answering questions for us, passing through the line, a little examination. And there were many tears and cries of families that were separated ----for consumption that they would find in certain people --- that they never knew they had it, but it was detected. Or as I said, children with trachoma and it was a very sad element there. Exciting and sad.

LEVINE Uh-huh. Now, was your mother very worried that you might be sent back?

FAS: No because at that time, in Warsaw they did ---- they said that it was gone, that they had cleared it up.

LEVINE: Okay, so then what it was the reunion like with your father?

FASS: As a child, I looked at him and I didn't know who he was and mother said, "This is papa," and so I said "papa" like any child would say. And then he took us back to a scrumptious three room tenement fifth floor with a toilet in the hall, and we had a --- an aunt and an uncle. It was three rooms. My father, my mother, my brother, myself, and an uncle and two aunts ---and we all lived in the three rooms. And --- of course --- like everyone will tell you the bathroom -- the toilet -- was in the hall. The so-called place to bathe your self was a washtub in the kitchen where the family all walked out until you were finish washing yourself. And but this was a very common thing, you took it for granted. Lines on the roof, hot nights sleeping on the roof. . .

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FASS: Because this is what we all went through. It would seem so natural because everyone was doing it around you.

LEVINE Did, how would you compare your living quarters on Second Avenue on the Lower East Side with what you had left in Pultusk?

FASS: Pultusk, I lived in a, incidentally I went back there.

LEVINE: Oh.

FASS: I went back to see where I was born, about fifteen years ago.

LEVINE: Oh.

FASS: It was changed. The only thing I found that was terribly upsetting was that the cemetery where all the relatives had been was desecrated completely. It was all broken up into stones, and just a mess to see. There are, isn't a Jew left in that town.

LEVINE: Uh-hmmm. Um-hmmm.

FASS: And when I was standing there, standing on the little bridge that as a child I remember growing up and playing there. It was just a small little wooden bridge --- it is now a concrete bridge. Very, very small, and people looked at me if as I had horns.

LEVINE: Really. Why, why do you think that was?

FASS: Because they would walk by and they would say, "Y?d (Jew), Y?den)". And there wasn't a Jew in town anymore. I lived in a place that they store --- the little store that my father had, where he was working, was downstairs. A flight up was where we lived. Up there, there was only one large room. It was the bedroom, the living room -- whatever you want to call it. It also had a chimney hearth; we would call it a pripichek. And that was where the heat came from the bricks to heat up the place. Next door to us was a stall where there were horses, as I said, and cows. And very often we would hear them banging against that little heating ball that we would have. Sometimes they would break it and sometimes it would be kept alive. But it was a very small place. Pultusk now has grown, from what I saw. But, actually, the physical lay out was the same.

LEVINE Uh-huh. Uh-huh. So, and one question I neglected to ask, did your brother's skin problem -- that he developed on the boat ---- was that a problem at Ellis Island?

FASS: Yes, a number of people had it because I remember that the infirmary had a number of people in there. It was a ---- like sort of a rash covering this body. And the doctor managed to give him a salve, I suppose. But he was there for some time. He was a very sensitive boy, as you would say, a musician. He. . .

LEVINE: Um-hmmm.

FASS: He wasn't a rough and tumbling kind...

LEVINE: Right.

FASS: And so he was very quiet, very musical and very intelligent.

LEVINE: So did he have to stay over at Ellis Island over night?

FASS: No. We stayed there over night, yes. All of us did. --

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FASS: But he didn't --- there was nothing wrong by that time. He was completely cured.

LEVINE: I see.

FASS: But the entire trip, he was in the infirmary.

LEVINE: I see. When you stayed over at Ellis Island was there, was there anything about that experience that you can recall?

FASS: No, nothing that I can really recall. I just remember the lay out of it ---that it reminded of a horse's stall. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] Uh-huh. Okay, so when you got to the Lower East Side, it must of taken a little something to get used to having your father around.

FASS Yes, very much so. But what can I tell you, a child manages to a get -- to get acclimated to most every thing after a while.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FASS: He was a quiet man, a very hard-working man, a very good father. And but, my mother was the dominant factor in my life.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you start school soon after you arrived?

FASS: Yes.

LEVINE: And could you speak any English?

FASS: No, none at all. And -- of course--- no matter what age you are they put you into the 1A or the Kindergarten and you sit. As a child, you pick up words and you're called a "mocky" and a green horn by the other kids. But after a while you acclimate. Children pick up languages much faster than the others.

LEVINE Uh-huh. And did your brother continue with his violin playing here?

FASS: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FASS: He was very well known in school because he was in the orchestra ---- more of a leader. He went on to become a high school music teacher.

LEVINE: Huh.

FASS: But, unfortunately, he au-au ---had a band and a trio, I should say. And he would go to the mountains to play in the summer in order to make a little money for his college education. But at that time, they did not treat the people working in the ----- in the mountains very well. They put them in --- in a sort of a room that they probably had and they also had a janitor there and he contracted TB. And so, it was dormant for a while. But after being a music teacher for a number of years, he had to give it up and he passed away.

LEVINE: Hmm. Do you remember the treatment he got for TB at that point?

FASS: They did not have any penicillin then. Penicillin, unfortunately, came out after he had passed away --- which might have saved him. All they could do is fresh air. The usual thing in consumption ---- fresh air, good food and rest.

LEVINE: Was he sent to a facility for that, for TB?

FASS: He was sent up to --- where is it? --- Was it Welfare Island at that time that they had a hospital there?

LEVINE: Oh, maybe so. I'm not sure. Uh-huh. I see.

FASS: We couldn't afford anything else. So he was there ---- and after a number of years, his lungs went out.

LEVINE Oh dear. Well, how about your family ---- the struggles and also the upward mobility that led you to move from the Lower East Side

FASS: Well.

LEVINE: to Williamsburg, and up. Can you talk about that?

FASS: Yes. Not that we were ever in any man-- means, comfortable. But my dad worked in a shop where he was given a steady job fixing the machines. So that was an income that we can rely on. And my mother like all, all the oth--European mothers went into the district of making coats. Selling coats, selling dresses, and we, we got along that.

LEVINE Did she work in Manhattan in the garment industry?

FASS: Yes. in the garment center.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And ---

FASS: In between both of them we existed. We tried to better ourselves each time. But we didn't come to an Atria at that time. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] Well, tell me about the move from the Lower East Side to Williamsburg. Do you remember, how old were you then, roughly?

FASS How old was I then? I was there for --- I came here at eight --- I must have been there till about ten. What can I tell you about it?

LEVINE: And then, when you moved, were the --- were the living quarters better?

FASS: [Superposed] When we moved to Williamsburg, it was ---- at least we had a bathroom. And it was also on the fifth floor which was supposed to be the least amount. And we lived there, I think also about two years and then we went to East New York. East New York was my happiest time. That's when I made friends and that's when I really had a

substantial school to go to that I knew ---- this was the school, the others were sort of passing by. And by that time, I was able to speak the language a little better and so make more friendships.

LEVINE: And --- .

FASS: Met my husband there.

LEVINE: Oh, when did you meet him?

FASS: When I was in East New York.

LEVINE: And were you now finished with school when you meet him?

FASS: No, no. I was I was in elementary school.

LEVINE: Oh.

FASS: He was three years older than I and he wouldn't ---- when we met he said, "I don't like the way you're talking. I'm going to teach you how to speak [giggles]. And he was my teacher.

LEVINE: Well, now was he born in this country?

FASS: Yes.

LEVIN: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So how had he what, what, was it your accent? Is that what he was objecting to?

FASS: I have a bad accent because in the house we've spoke Yiddish.

LEVINE: Ah.

FASS: So that I never --- didn't have an opportunity. And he would sit me down. He'd come to the house and sit me down and teach me how to say words. And we grew up together.

LEVINE: And, so but then your family moved from East New York to the Bronx.

FASS: Yes. To the Bronx. The reason for the move was because they said the air was fresher there for my brother. Better. And we lived there for a couple of years, I don't remember exactly where. It must have been during my years when I was ready to be married or go steady because this boy came from Brooklyn to the Bronx and we eventually married.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay and then you say you settled in Brooklyn, it was East New York?

FASS: Yes, East New York.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Wow. Well, looking back on, your immigration experience -- the fact that you came here as an a eight year old -do

you think that had an impact on you, your personality the way you think about things, the fact that you changed cultures and. . .

FASS: Yes. I always had an inferiority conflict.

LEVINE: Really.

FASS: I always felt that I was the outsider, where all my friends were American born. It gives you a complex, it does.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FASS: And sometimes in taunting the child they would say, "Ah, you're a mocky." That was the favorite expression at that time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you, did you, was anti-Semitism, did you experience it in Poland and here and was it?

FASS: In Poland and in Williamsburg. In Williamsburg, I was afraid to walk certain streets because there was, well, like you know the Italians had trouble with the Irish. The Irish had trouble with another sector. And it all came down to the Jews. So that I was forbidden actually to step out of the boundary of going to school and coming home, going to school and coming home, because on the next block you could have been beaten up.

LEVINE: Um-hmmm.

FASS: But that was the way of life, that time.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well. What would you say you are most proud of that you have done in your life? What makes you feel satisfied that you did?

FASS: That I did, that I came here or ---- I can't tell you what made me satisfied.

LEVINE: [Superposed] Well, maybe coming here is a satisfaction already.

FASS: The fact that my life was bettered and mother and father lived here. But that, during that time we had a lot of heartache with the Holocaust. We lost all our family --- cousins, aunts, uncles, all of them there. So that it was never a settled time. But I was very fortunate. I met a lovely man, as I said, the one who taught me how to speak English and I had a good life with him. So I can't say I didn't better my self. I most certainly did. I probably would not have existed if I had stayed in Poland.

LEVINE: True. Do you remember the Depression, the Great Depression... and its effect on you, your family?

FASS: [Superposed] Oh yes, very much so. And the penny meant a penny and it was to-----, it was tough. Both parents working, leaving you alone. Coming home from school and being ordered to stay in the house, not to dare to go out. It was a different environment. It was

always a struggle --- always the ---. There were at that time, what was called Aktzies (securities). Do you know what an Aktzie is? For the immigrant people, it was a place where they can go and borrow money and pay it back as little as they could --- as little as they could at the time. And so it was always borrowing a few dollars to pay the rent and having it to pay it back

LEVINE: How, how do you spell that, I haven't encountered that?

FASS: Aktzie, I wouldn't know how. . .

LEVINE: O-X? Aktzie?

FASS: It's --- it's a -- it was a very common name, Aktzie. And that was the lending place for most all the immigrants at that time. I wouldn't know how to spell it, but --

LEVINE: Yeah. Was it; was it a Yiddish word or English word do you know?

FASS: I think it was more of a Yiddish word --- Yiddish-Polish word.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FASS: Because all sort of immigrants went there.

LEVINE: I see.

FASS: And mostly Jewish. The East Side, I don't remember anybody not belonging to an Aktzie where they could go in and borrow a few dollars.

LEVINE. And how about your mother, how did she fare here? Was she satisfied with this life?

FASS: Yes. She was. Because she saw us growing up and having a better life and she went, as I said, to work in the garment center.

LEVINE: Um-hmm

FASS: She was a well-read women. She kept up with it. She went to night school learned how to speak English and write English. She did not want to be left behind. And she was a very dominant factor in our lives, a good one. My father was a hard working, simple, quiet man.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

FASS: And that's it.

LEVINE: Did they become citizens?

FASS: Oh yes, I became a citizen through my father.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember their becoming citizens?

FASS: Oh, I didn't have to go with him.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

FASS: But he just had to --- in fact, I have citizenship papers where we're listed all of us. My mother, had to go on her own, but my brother and I became citizens on my father's.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What do you think, is there anything you would say to --- the man who drove me out here was an immigrant from China, and is there anything you would think of to say to someone coming to this country at this time --- based on your own experience?

FASS: It's a bad acclimating your self. It, it takes a while. It takes a lot out of your personality and out of your character and out of your emotions. But after a while you realize how wonderful, that you've escaped what you ran away from and are at peace here. It is. It's a marvelous feeling.

LEVINE: Hmmm. Well I think that's a beautiful place to end, and I want thank you for a very interesting interview.

FASS: Interesting? I think I've been very dull. I've said what everyone else would say.

LEVINE: Not at all, not at all. You're story is most interesting and the way you say it is also. So I thank you. And ---

FASS: I thank you Dr. Levine.

LEVINE: [Laughs] I am talking to ----

FASS: You are a doctor of what?

LEVINE: Let me just sign off and then we will go. I've been speaking with Fay Fass, and it's December 3, 2003, and this is Janet Levine signing off for The National Park Service.

END OF INTERVIEW
EI-1296/FASS