

EI-132

GABRIEL BAUMGARTEN

BIRTH DATE: SEPTEMBER 19, 1912

INTERVIEW DATE: 4/4/1992

RUNNING TIME: 24:58

INTERVIEWER: DEBRA HEID

RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY

INTERVIEW LOCATION: NEW YORK CITY, NY.

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1/1993

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 1/1993

POLAND, 1920

AGE: 8

RESIDENCES:

- **RUSSIA: ZAKLIKOW**
- **THE US: NYC, AHIMBIA ST.**

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mr. Baumgarten is the husband of Selma Baumgarten, EI-131. Paul E.Sigrist, Jr., Oral Historian, 2/2/1993.

HEID: This is Debra Heid for the National Park Service. Today is April 4th, and today I'm here with Gabriel Baumgarten, who came from Poland in 1920. And we're here at the Howard Johnson's at Eighth Avenue. Good morning, Mr. Baumgarten.

BAUMGARTEN: Good morning.

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

HEID: Could you tell me a little bit about, first of all, what year did you come?

BAUMGARTEN: I came here in 1920.

HEID: Okay. And when's the, could you give me your birth date?

BAUMGARTEN: I was born on September 19th. My birthday? September 19, 1912.

HEID: And you told me earlier that you came from Poland.

BAUMGARTEN: From Poland.

HEID: Do you remember what life was like in Poland?

BAUMGARTEN: I remember, I remember some things. I do remember one thing specifically. I was walking with my mother in this little town. Incidentally, I've been there. I've been back there a couple of years ago.

HEID: What's the name of the town?

BAUMGARTEN: Zaklikow. You probably won't find that on the map now, but it's . . .

HEID: Could you spell that?

BAUMGARTEN: Z-A-K-L-I-K-O-W. In fact, it's still there, because we were there a

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

couple of years ago.

MRS. BAUMGARTEN: We went to it.

BAUMGARTEN: And I remember my mother holding me by the hand, and we passed a church, and I fell. I fell and sort of kneeled. And my mother grabbed me and says, "You don't kneel in front of a church." And that stuck in my mind for some reason, because I had never thought about, you know, and she thought, you know, that kneeling in front of a church, for Jewish people, is unheard of, you know. And I remember that. And I remember the church seemed like a very big, you know, with a brick wall and everything. And we lived in this small house, and that's about all I remember from my life there.

HEID: What type of town was it? Do you remember what the town looked like? Was it an industry town?

BAUMGARTEN: Well, I remember now because I have been back there since. It's a, little houses, a couple of stores. A very small town. Nothing outstanding. I don't remember any industry there because I was not, I wasn't interested. But when I returned there a couple of years ago we did go to a little restaurant. We had a guide with us, you know, who spoke Polish. And he asked people if they remember my family. And one old lady, must have been about ninety years old, claims that she remembered my family by the name Baumgarten. She's a Polish woman. And then we went, took us a walk to the church that I, and it looked like a small little church now. And there's a cemetery behind that church. And they told me, and of course it's probably in history,

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

that they killed all the Jews there, and there were bones scattered all over. The Nazis came in, you know.

HEID: By church do you mean a Catholic church, or a temple?

BAUMGARTEN: In back of the church there was a graveyard.

HEID: Was it a Catholic church?

BAUMGARTEN: Yes, a Catholic church. In back of the church there was a graveyard, and they, this old lady told my guide that the Nazis killed a lot of Jews and threw them in there. That's what I heard. I couldn't, I can't verify that.

HEID: Now you said you lived in a small house.

BAUMGARTEN: A small house.

HEID: Do you remember the house you grew up in?

BAUMGARTEN: Uh, I saw it, yeah. I sort of faintly remember it. A small house. All I remember is a room there. I do remember one other thing, see. All this is coming back. My uncle, my mother's brother, was in the Army, the Polish Army at the time. And he come home on leave or something, and that was a great event of my life. He was in uniform and all that. And being a little kid there I remember him and I said, "Some day I'm going to be a soldier."

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

HEID: Well, let me ask you a question. Was your father still alive?

BAUMGARTEN: Was my father?

HEID: Was your father still alive at the time?

BAUMGARTEN: Oh, sure. My father came to America before we did, about a couple of years before. He became a citizen.

HEID: What is your father's name?

BAUMGARTEN: Jacob.

HEID: Jacob.

BAUMGARTEN: Yes.

HEID: And your mother's name?

BAUMGARTEN: My mother's name is Sophie. Her maiden name was Heller.

HEID: H-E-L-L-E-R?

BAUMGARTEN: That's right. And, in fact, we have our name, our father's name, on Ellis Island, you know, on that wall. And he came here and sent for us. In 1920 we came over.

HEID: Now, how much earlier did he come over?

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

BAUMGARTEN: Uh, about three years, I think.

HEID: So you were by yourself and your mother was by herself for two years.

BAUMGARTEN: That's right. She was by herself for a couple of years. And he became a citizen as soon as he came over.

HEID: Now, you mentioned before you had brothers and sisters?

BAUMGARTEN: Three, yeah. At the time I had two brothers.

HEID: And what were their names? What are their names?

BAUMGARTEN: Charlie. First my older brother is named Charles. And the next, I am Gabriel and my brother is, uh . . . (he pauses)

MRS. BAUMGARTEN: Ben.

BAUMGARTEN: Ben. I had two more brothers when I came over here. But there was three of us from Europe. Ben, Charlie and me.

HEID: So what was life like? I mean, here you have your mother, who's all by herself with three small children. What was life, do you remember what it was like?

BAUMGARTEN: Well, she had her sister there, and aunts and uncles, I guess. A little

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

family, like. So for three years, we didn't notice any, you know, I was too small to realize that there was any problem because it was like a whole family, a little village there. There was relations all over the place, you know.

HEID: Do you remember what, do you remember something that your mother might have cooked special for you in the old land, you know, in Poland?

BAUMGARTEN: In the old days?

HEID: Yeah, in the old days. Was there something special?

BAUMGARTEN: (he laughs) All I remember is lima beans, lima beans and, uh . . .

MRS. BAUMGARTEN: Noodles.

BAUMGARTEN: Little noodles, chopped up.

MRS. BAUMGARTEN: Lima beans and noodles.

BAUMGARTEN: That's all I remember about food home, I guess. I know one thing. We didn't have much milk that I remember. Once in a while we had some milk, and it was a big deal.

HEID: So now why did your father make a decision to go to America?

BAUMGARTEN: Well, if you're, as far as I remember history, you know, it's Cossacks

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

and, uh, of course, there were no Nazis there, but there was anti-Semitism all over the place.

MRS. BAUMGARTEN: Bolsheviks.

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah.

HEID: Do you remember any of that?

BAUMGARTEN: No. Not in Europe. I don't remember it, because I was too small to realize it.

HEID: Now, think about, do you have any memories about when you left your little house, and traveling to the ship to come to America? Do you remember that?

BAUMGARTEN: Oh, yes, yeah, yeah. I remember that, yes.

HEID: Did you have to take a train?

BAUMGARTEN: Oh, I forgot to tell you this. (to Mrs. Baumgarten) Should I tell them that, Sal? During the war, I was abandoned. I was, we were fleeing from one place to another. At one time the Germans came, one time the Russians came. They put me on a wagon and I remember, one thing I remember, I fell off a wagon as we were fleeing.

HEID: This is while you're still in Poland?

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

BAUMGARTEN: I was in Poland. And my mother and my aunt were on the wagon, and I guess my brother was, too, but I don't remember that. Anyway, we were fleeing, and I fell off the wagon, and I was a fat little kid at the time. (he laughs) I shouldn't have said that. And a bullet creased my head. It left a mark right here, for years I saw it. A little indentation. It just creased it, from what I hear. And they didn't know I was gone because they had all the luggage and stuff on top of that. So they told me this I have to take their word for it. My aunt tells me that when they stopped at the next stop for a refreshment or something, they realized I wasn't there. So somebody said, "Well, he's probably gone, you know, with the bullets flying all over the place. So let's go on." So my mother and somebody else said, "No. Either we all go or we don't go." And they went back and picked me up and took me back.

HEID: So it was the type of thing that they had to leave all of a sudden?

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah, they had to leave. There was a war going on. This was during the war, their war. And my mother, they tell me also, and I can't verify, used to smuggle goods from one place to another, to make a living. She was a smuggler, in other words. And she told me a lot of stories which I can't verify how she nearly got caught, and all that stuff. But that much I remember. I remember that little bullet creasing me. That's all I remember.

HEID: So when you left your little town in Poland, you actually traveled by horse and cart to get to the boat?

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

BAUMGARTEN: Yes. That's correct, yes. We got on this boat, and it was steerage, as far as I remember. We were poor, you know.

HEID: Do you remember the name of the boat?

BAUMGARTEN: No, I don't remember it. Maybe I can look. I don't remember the name of the boat. But it was, we were in the lowest class, steerage. And the food was terrible, as far as I remember, because, you know, I wasn't used to that kind of food. And when we got to the United States and saw the Statue of Liberty, oh, boy. And then my father . . .

HEID: Wait, tell me more about steerage, though. What was that like?

BAUMGARTEN: It was, (he laughs), it was bad. Crowded.

HEID: Did you have your own bunk bed?

BAUMGARTEN: We had a bunk bed, yes. And I . . .

HEID: Was it a lot of bunk beds, or did you have a little room?

BAUMGARTEN: Oh, no. It was a lot of bunk beds, and my brother slept with me, I think, or on the side of me, or something. And I remember getting up and a lot of people and there was a big mess hall downstairs and they fed us something or other.

HEID: You don't remember what kind of food they fed you?

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

BAUMGARTEN: It was terrible food, I remember that. I couldn't eat it, hardly eat it. Because I was a fat kid (he laughs) and I liked to eat at that time. I couldn't even eat that stuff. I mean, I gagged at it, it was, I wasn't used to it. Probably that was it. Anyway, we survived that. And, uh . . .

HEID: So now, tell me. You're on the boat, and you're coming into the Harbor. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah. Everybody got up and looked at it and waved and all that. And I, you know, somebody carried me and up on the boat. And I looked at it.

HEID: You were on somebody's shoulders.

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah. I don't remember who it was. But, and I looked at the Statue of Liberty, and they said this was, this was it, the Golden Land. We're here, we're arrived. And everybody was so happy.

HEID: Now, one of the questions, now, you were on the cart. Now, your mother was there and your three brothers. I'm sorry, your two brothers. Who else was there with you? Who else?

BAUMGARTEN: An aunt, and maybe somebody else, but an aunt.

HEID: An aunt. Your mother's sister came also.

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah, my mother's sister, right. No, no. They didn't come to America with us. That . . .

HEID: They took you to, they just took you to the boat.

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah.

HEID: And they stayed behind?

BAUMGARTEN: They stayed behind. They came years, years later. They said they couldn't leave then. But we got here, and my father picked us up.

HEID: Okay. So now you saw the Statue of Liberty.

BAUMGARTEN: Right.

HEID: Then you land at Ellis Island.

BAUMGARTEN: Right.

HEID: What happened there?

BAUMGARTEN: Oh, Ellis Island, yeah. That's another place where we had to stay overnight for some reason. I don't remember why. And the food was terrible again. (he laughs) All I remember is the food being bad. For a kid that liked to eat, that was my worst impression. But I somehow or other ate it. And it was also, I remember Ellis Island the way it used to be, you know.

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

HEID: Well, tell me about that.

BAUMGARTEN: Well, all I remember is long tables and, uh, you sat down for the food. And then we had to go here, and then we had to go there. That's about all I can . . .

HEID: A lot of people there?

BAUMGARTEN: A lot of people, yes. A lot of people were detained for some reason or other, you know. And then I remember getting to the guy who was supposed to give you the passage. He asked my name, and he put down Gabriel. That was, my name was Gabriel. And Charlie, his name was Yushiah in Jewish, and they couldn't think of anything to match it, so they said, "Charles."

HEID: Is that how he got his name.

BAUMGARTEN: That's how he got his name. And later on we found out he could have been called Isaiah or something, you know, close to it. But the guy who ran this thing, he couldn't figure out. He says, "Charles." Okay, "Charles" it is.

HEID: And what about your other brother?

BAUMGARTEN: Bennie. His name was Benjamin. They came close. That was close. They found it, Benjamin is in Hebrew and Benjamin is his name. So that was okay, but Charlie got robbed. He claims that he

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

should have been called Joshua or something. (everyone laughs)

HEID: Do you remember the examinations?

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah. Examination, and they looked up my head and they looked for lice. And I remember there was some talk about I had lice or something, but they didn't detain us. There was, my mother was worried for a while. I remember being scrubbed and washed my hair, even before the examination, I guess.

HEID: So they took you into like a shower room or something.

BAUMGARTEN: More like a sink to me. It looked more like a kitchen sink, that I remember. And they washed my hairs, scrubbed it and scrubbed it. And we passed, we all passed. There was more. Charlie and Ben didn't have any problem at all. But with me, I guess, this was a big problem. And being a fat little kid, I guess. (he laughs) I don't know. Anyway, I seemed to be like a burden to them, but anyway, I made it. (they all laugh)

HEID: Okay. So now you passed the inspection, and then your father's there to meet you. Do you remember that?

BAUMGARTEN: Yes. Yeah, it was a cab. Yeah, a cab. He had a cab waiting for us. And I remember going, driving through the East Side and looking around. And then like a new world to me, with the big buildings.

HEID: Well, when you saw him, did you remember him? Because you

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

hadn't seen him in three years.

BAUMGARTEN: No, no. I didn't remember him, no. It must have been more than three years. I didn't remember him, no. He had sent a picture back to us with a beard. And when we came over here, he was clean-shaven. So my mother was even shocked. Of course, she recognized him but, I mean, I saw his picture had a beard, and I said that was my father, but when he picked us up he was clean shaven. They told me it was my father. It was okay with me. (he laughs)

HEID: What about your mother? Was she happy to see him?

BAUMGARTEN: Oh, yes, she was happy to see him. And we drove to the East Side on Columbia Street, fourth floor apartment. And we shared a bathroom with the next door neighbor. I remember that. I remember even though it was the fourth floor, we had like a little patio.

MRS. BAUMGARTEN: Balcony.

BAUMGARTEN: No, no, overlooking. It looked out into the street.

MRS. BAUMGARTEN: Porch.

BAUMGARTEN: It was a little, it wasn't a porch. You couldn't get out on it, but . . .

MRS. BAUMGARTEN: A fire escape. (they laugh)

BAUMGARTEN: It looked like a patio to me, but actually it was just a little room

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

between the window and the overlook. So I looked out the window and saw all the streetcars, and all that stuff.

HEID: Do you remember how many rooms there were?

BAUMGARTEN: Hmm. There must have been three rooms, because the three of us slept in one bed, in one bedroom. Mother and Father in another, and the kitchen. There was no parlor. I know there was no parlor, that's for sure. The kitchen, and a couple of table and chairs was the rest of the house.

HEID: And what did your father do for a living?

BAUMGARTEN: He worked in knitting mills. He was a knitting mill worker. He was, you know, made sweaters and stuff like that.

HEID: And your mother, did she stay home? Was she able to afford to stay home?

BAUMGARTEN: Oh yeah, stayed home. She had to stay home. Three kids. Of course later on she had two more, but, uh . . .

HEID: All boys, or . . .

BAUMGARTEN: All boys. Two more boys. Five. I've got four brothers.

HEID: And what are your other brothers' names?

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

BAUMGARTEN: The other brother's name is Bernie, and Aaron. Aaron is the one I just saw. Aaron is the little one. They're the only ones born in America. The rest of us were born over there.

HEID: And how was life for you in America?

BAUMGARTEN: It was wonderful. (he laughs) For me it was wonderful, because we got in the street. Although my father was very religious, and that was the only drawback to us. He watched us, we shouldn't do this and that. And Saturday you couldn't do anything, you know. Go to synagogue.

HEID: Was that a change for you? When you were just in Poland with your mother were you religious there?

BAUMGARTEN: I didn't notice it.

HEID: So when you came to America that was a big change?

BAUMGARTEN: It was a change, yes. We did go to school, public school. Later on they took us out of public school and put us in the, what do you call, Yeshiva, you know.

MRS. BAUMGARTEN: Hebrew school.

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah. But the religion was the only thing that bothered me. It bothered all of us, actually, because we couldn't play ball or anything like that, the way we wanted to. But my father worked very hard and,

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

of course, my mother, with five children later on, she was home working herself.

HEID: Let me ask you a question. Now, you went to a Yeshiva, in school. And were you able to stay in school, or did you have to leave school to work to supplement your family's income?

BAUMGARTEN: Oh, you mean later on? Oh, I started to work when I was fifteen years old. I had to give up. I did go to continuation school, you know.

HEID: Was that a choice you could make, or was it because it was a necessity?

BAUMGARTEN: Necessity, necessity. None of us went to college or anything.

HEID: Because you had to help out at home

BAUMGARTEN: Right. We were very poor. My father, his work, five kids, you know, and we just barely got along. We were poor. But like everybody else that we knew, we were all poor. We lived in a poor neighborhood, and we, it didn't bother us too much until, actually it didn't bother me until later on when I got a little older and realized what I haven't got. Because when we were kids everybody was the same. We ate, anyway. We never starved or anything.

HEID: What type of food did you eat here?

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

BAUMGARTEN: Every day the same thing. (he laughs) Lima beans and little noodles. (they laugh) Right. My father . . .

HEID: I thought that's what you said you ate in Poland.

BAUMGARTEN: That's correct.

HEID: And you ate the same thing here?

BAUMGARTEN: That's right, because that was my father's favorite dish. Klishklikabelok (Yiddish) they used to call it. It's lima beans with little chopped noodles.

HEID: Well, let me ask you a question. Do you like lima beans?

BAUMGARTEN: I like lima beans now, but for years I didn't. And meat. We ate meat, you know. The cheapest cuts of meat. No chops or anything like that, but we used to call it, there was a name for it. But I knew it was just plain meat, boiled.

HEID: What did they do? Oh, they put it in one big pot?

BAUMGARTEN: Boiled it, right. One pot and boiled it, right.

HEID: And that's every day?

BAUMGARTEN: And that was every day for, except Friday and Saturday. We had chicken then. Oh, yeah. Every day we knew we had the same thing,

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

but Friday and Saturday, Friday night and Saturday all day, we knew we were going to have chicken.

HEID: I guess you looked forward to that.

BAUMGARTEN: Looked forward to Friday and Saturday like wow. And one thing that I can't, it's really, I don't think it has anything to do with it. But they had chopped gefilte fish. You heard of that, right? And my father, naturally, every Friday ate gefilte fish. And myself and my brother, one of my brothers, we hated gefilte fish. So we used to say instead of gefilte fish, we'd say we want pickle. (he laughs) So you know what pickle became? To be known as "'stead of." (he laughs) "Instead of fish." So we used to say, "We want 'stead of." So my mother would give me a pickle instead of fish. It was Bernie and me, Bennie and me, rather. We were the only ones that couldn't stand gefilte fish. So we'd say, "'stead of." We say 'stead of to this day, once in a while. Whenever I have a pickle, I think of 'stead of. And my brother, my other brother, he loved gefilte fish. (they laugh) Silly.

HEID: That's good. Looking back to our conversation, it sounds like you liked to eat.

BAUMGARTEN: Yes. I was fat. They used to call me the "grubas." (Polish), which means "fat one."

HEID: How did you get fat on lima beans, though?

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

BAUMGARTEN: I ate a lot of them. I was fat until later on when I slimmed down. But I was, that's what stunted my growth, they told me. My father and mother used to say, "If you didn't eat so much you'd have grown." But I didn't. I was the runt of the litter.

HEID: Well, looking back, is there anything else that you remember that you'd like to add at this time?

BAUMGARTEN: Well, we had, outside of the religious part of it, I had a very happy life. I was very, I liked to play ball and stuff like that, and when I can get away from my father I used to play ball when he wasn't looking. And until I got to be working age, I was happy. Then I got to be, when I started to work I was happier yet because I got away from the house. I could eat out once in a while.

HEID: When you started work, what type of jobs did you do?

BAUMGARTEN: At that time I took anything they gave me, which was errand boy. In those days at the downtown Broadway, downtown, they had these dress accessories, you know, buttons and stuff like that. That was my first job, as an errand boy. Before that, in the summertime, before I started to work, I used to peddle sodas to the working people. I'd hire a wagon and fill it up with sodas and go down Broadway from where I lived on the East Side, and go into the factories at lunch hour or something like that. And for three cents or five cents, there was two drinks. Five cents and three cents. I'd peddle them. I'd make about a dollar or two a day, and I was in seventh heaven.

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

HEID: I was going to say that's good money for those days for a child.

BAUMGARTEN: It was. It was. But only through the summertime, vacation, you know.

HEID: And did you have to give the money to your mother?

BAUMGARTEN: Oh, yes. I gave most of it. I kept a little. My brother and I did that.

HEID: Now, looking back at it now, do you think your parents had any regrets about coming to America?

BAUMGARTEN: No. No way. Especially later on when the Nazis, my father, he said he did the smartest thing when he came. Later on some of his other relatives came over. But unfortunately he lost some of his people to the Nazis. And my father was a hard-working man, and religious all his life. But he came to America and he was very happy.

HEID: And did he become a citizen eventually?

BAUMGARTEN: He was a citizen by the time we got here, and we all became citizens automatically in those days. We didn't have to give papers or anything. Because 1920 if the father was a citizen, you're a citizen. So we were a citizen as soon as we came over. They changed the law since then.

HEID: Did that make it easier for your processing at Ellis Island, do you

EI-132/BAUMGARTEN

think?

BAUMGARTEN: I think so, yes. Because we were already citizens. Right. You're probably right. They might have kept me there if I wasn't. Right.

HEID: Is there anything else you'd like to add at this time?

BAUMGARTEN: Well, at this time, I'm glad to be here. (they all laugh) I'm glad to be anywhere, let's face it.

HEID: Well, then, this is Debra Heid from the National Park Service, and I'm here today with Gabriel Baumgarten at the Howard Johnson's on Eighth Avenue. Thank you very much for your time, sir.

BAUMGARTEN: You're welcome.

MRS. BAUMGARTEN: Yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW