

EI-1442

FULL NAME: Ben Minkoff
BIRTHDATE: July 9, 1938
INTERVIEW DATE: February 23, 2007
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 68
RUNNING TIME: 45 minutes
INTERVIEWER: Janet Levine
RECORDING ENGINEER: Same
INTERVIEW LOCATION: Boynton Beach, Florida
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: Rachel Smith
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: Simah Kraus

COUNTRY:
AGE:

SHIP:
PORT:
RESIDENCES:

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Ben Minkoff did not come through Ellis Island. He is telling the story of his father's experience and how the Wall of Honor at Ellis Island has been pivotal in finding out more about his family.

LEVINE: Today is February the twenty-third, the year two thousand and seven. I'm here in Boynton Beach, Florida, with Ben Minkoff, who is a second generation Ellis Island immigrant. Who, um, is going to speak about his father's side of the family. And how the Statue of Liberty Ellis Island Foundation's Wall of Honor was instrumental in, uh, the family making contact with members that they didn't even know existed. So it's an interesting story of family members who came to this country in different ways and, uh, and finally, uh, found each other and united as family. So

this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and if we could just start at the beginning. If you would just say your birth date.

MINKOFF: July 9, 1938.

LEVINE: And your father's birth date?

MINKOFF: uh, (laughs) let's put it this way, it would be, according to the way he always explained it, it would be uh, the seventh candle of Hanukkah. Which related to somewhere around the twenty-fifth of December each year. Uh, around 1905 I believe. 1903 or 1905. That's the closest we were able to get. You have a better record because we gave all the papers to the Ellis Island Foundation. We gave his passport, his birth certificates, and all that information. You have that there.

LEVINE: Oh, OK, so

MINKOFF: We donated it to the Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Oh great. (aside) Here let me get this. OK, so, alright, um, and as far as you know, where was your father coming from?

MINKOFF: Well, he was born in a town of Borisov

LEVINE: Could you spell that?

MINKOFF: Something like, B-O-R-I-S-O-V

LEVINE: OK, thanks. And that's in the, that was in?

MINKOFF: That was in the Uk.-- somewhere around the U-- near Minsk.

LEVINE: OK

MINKOFF: That was approximately 60 miles, or 75 kilometers from Minsk. Northeast of Minsk.

LEVINE: So we'll think the Ukraine then?

MINKOFF: Yes, it would be the Ukraine.

LEVINE: Ok, so, uh, he was born there and he was there until?

MINKOFF: He was approximately eight, possibly nine years old when he immigrated with his mother and his brother and his sister, youngest -- younger sister.

LEVINE: And older brother or?

MINKOFF: No, younger brother.

LEVINE: Younger brother. So he was the oldest boy?

MINKOFF: He was the oldest son.

LEVINE: And he was the oldest child?

MINKOFF: Yes

LEVINE: Alright, OK, and um, and you mentioned that his father, your grandfather, had immigrated before that.

MINKOFF: Approximately two years prior to their leaving Russia.

LEVINE: OK and they left in 1912?

MINKOFF: Somewhere around 1912, yes. 1912-ish. I, it's between, 19, yeah, around 1912 is the best we can, we can garner from whatever papers we've got.

LEVINE: OK. And do you know the circumstances, in other words, did anybody ever say why they left at that time?

MINKOFF: Well they, yeah, at that time it was because my grandfather had finally saved up enough money from working as a, I believe, as a tailor or something like that. Oh and he was actually, he was, I see, he was a tailor and he was a bootlegger.

LEVINE: Huh.

MINKOFF: So, um, and because, I guess, that was why he was able to send for them. Also, from what I was told, again by my father and also by my mother at another time, that the pogroms at that time were getting to be extremely vicious. So the Jews were just finding ways to get out. And just when -- according to what I was able to -- when we visited Israel (in 1983, I think, - - '81 (coughs) somewhere along there -- '83)-- my wife and I went on -- we went to the Diaspora museum and we did some investigation. And we found that the city was burned to the ground by the Nazis. Prior to that, there was somewhere around eight thousand Jews living in the little *shtibel* [sic] of Borisov. And then, by the time the Nazis got there, there was maybe a thousand at that much, that many. Maybe that many; maybe less, we don't know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: So most of them had already immigrated [sic]. Somewhere. We don't know where, somewhere.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: OK.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: Uh, that's about all I can tell ya as far as that is concerned. He came here. He went to school for a very short period of time, left and went to work.

LEVINE: OK. Did you know your grandfather?

MINKOFF: Yes I did. My grandfather Harry; Heschel.

LEVINE: Heschel. And, uh, your father's name?

MINKOFF: Well, it was, in English it was William, but he was born Vela or Velvel.

LEVINE: H, spell that one?

MINKOFF: Velvo? V-E-L-V-O. Velvo.

LEVINE: Velvo. OK. And, um, so, uh, let's see, do you know anything about your grandfather? What he did in Russia, what he did?

MINKOFF: In Russia he was, I remember my father telling me my grandfather made bricks.

LEVINE: Oh.

MINKOFF: Out of straw and mud and whatever. I don't know what they have, I mean I don't know exactly how they did it. But he made bricks. He was a brick maker, or whatever you want to call it, right.

LEVINE: Well.

MINKOFF: That's how he made whatever meager living, you know, they made.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: So I don't know.

LEVINE: But somehow he knew how to be a tailor, I guess?

MINKOFF: When he came to this country, I was told, he was already -- picked it up as a young boy in Russia. My grandfather. And he became, I don't know, I guess he needed a job, he walked into wherever he went to work and he became a tailor. Then later on he became a presser, uh, on ladies' dresses. Then he did some tailoring in his house and so forth. But as a young -- I don't know about this, this is only what I've read because my -- my son did a -- tried to do some history on the family. And he was able to dig that up from interviewing different members of the family.

LEVINE: Oh I see. Uh-huh

MINKOFF: And, uh, so, he did that. And that my father also was a little bit of a tailor and became a [not understood]. Became a presser. They were really just basic laborers, you know, in that my father also worked. Uh, I was very, very young and he also worked as, in an organization called the WPA. I don't know, the Work Projects

LEVINE: Oh yeah.

MINKOFF: Work Projects, you know, during the Depression. So, um.

LEVINE: What did he do for the WPA, do you know?

MINKOFF: He was a ditch digger, I think, ya know,.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: Something like that.

LEVINE: Well.

MINKOFF: So, uh, he, um, huh.

LEVINE: Yeah. Oh, well now, just to quickly say, you said that your father, when he was eight to nine years old, he came on the Lusitania, leaving from Liverpool.

MINKOFF: Right. Landed in, in uh, Ellis Island. Was taken from Ellis Island because they thought he had, um, uh, what do you call it? He couldn't walk str -- rickets? I think that was.

LEVINE: Oh yeah.

MINKOFF: You know when his legs

LEVINE: His bones, uh huh

MINKOFF: Were not, you know, so they thought he was, sick. So they put him in a isolation area, I think

LEVINE: For observation?

MINKOFF: For obs-, whatever it was. Yeah they put him in isolation. And he uh, I don't know, I don't know how long he stayed there. But obviously, they corrected whatever the problem was. And then he came, he was able to pass through and so forth. While he was there, this is where the change, I guess, takes place. Because, when he came here, his name was Minkow.

LEVINE: Right

MINKOFF: Apparently, the, whatever you call them, men --

LEVINE: Inspector?

MINKOFF: The inspectors either didn't understand it or misread the, the, the

LEVINE: Manifest

MINKOFF: The, whatever it was

LEVINE: The ship's manifest

MINKOFF: To how it was spelled and they changed it to Minkoff. My grandfather was Minkow [ph] and my grandmother (laughs) and my father and my uncle and my aunt were Mink-- Minkoff. So my grandfather changed the name to Minkoff to make it easier. Umm. And that's, that's what our name is. But our original name is Minkow. And that's how this thing came about with the other people.

LEVINE: OK. Now did your father or did your grandfather or someone tell you that that did happen with the name change?

MINKOFF: Yeah, my father.

LEVINE: At Ellis Island?

MINKOFF: Yeah my father told me that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: He told me that when he came here, his name was changed.

LEVINE: OK, because that, it's kind of a myth. People think it.

MINKOFF: But it was a spelling change. It wasn't a

LEVINE: It wasn't a

MINKOFF: They didn't change the name. It was a spelling

LEVINE: Spelling

MINKOFF: Misunderstanding. The way my grandmother probably wrote the Minkow, she wrote it sort of in a Russian v. Like a, like a V-V.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: W with the V-V. And the inspector thought that as F-F. And that's how he changed it to Minkow.

LEVINE: Ah.

MINKOFF: To Minkoff. From Minkow to Minkoff.

LEVINE: Right.

MINKOFF: But that, that's where, you know, the change came about. That, that's the only reason it probably came about. It wasn't because they decided to just change the name.

LEVINE: Right, Right.

MINKOFF: So.

LEVINE: Right. And did your father ever tell you anything else that he remembered about Ellis Island?

MINKOFF: Uh. Only that the -- he was separated from his mother a little bit because of his illness. Ah, you know, from his family.

LEVINE: Right.

MINKOFF: Uh. They didn't mistreat him, but he was isolated. He was kept in a room by himself. He wasn't with other people. And, uh, not much more. He doesn't remember, nobody beat him or anything like that. He was kept, ya know, umm.

LEVINE: But he was frightened?

MINKOFF: They fed him.

LEVINE: I imagine.

MINKOFF: Yes, but he was very frightened. And I don't know how long, I don't recall how long he stayed in there. He told me, but, I, I don't remember how long.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: And he told me that he stayed there. And then he was, reunited with his mother, ya know, and his fa-- his mother and his brother and his sister. And then, they were on Ellis Island for almost three months.

LEVINE: Oh.

MINKOFF: They stayed a very long time. I don't know, I do not recall the reasons. But they were there for almost, almost three months.

LEVINE: [not understood] Yeah. (static noises)

MINKOFF: And, which is, which was, uh, I don't know if that's normal, was normal at that time.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: 'Cause --

LEVINE: This is gonna make static, so let's just -- .

MINKOFF: OK.

LEVINE: So yeah. Yeah, it was not normal.

MINKOFF: OK.

LEVINE: I mean, it wasn't completely unusual, but, uh,

MINKOFF: Yeah, but

LEVINE: Most people passed through in four hours.

MINKOFF: No. They were there for three months.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. OK OK.

MINKOFF: And umm. Then my grandfather came and got 'em. And then they left and their life began.

(cell phone ring)

MINKOFF: Ya know. Sorry.

LEVINE: OK.

MINKOFF: Let me just-want to shut that off for a min-?

LEVINE: Yeah.

[break in tape]

MINKOFF: My grandfather had worked in a tailor shop. My father, I guess, went to school for a short period of time. He left school at sixth grade. He went to work doing, whatever it was you do at that age. I do not know what exactly. I think he tried being a tailor, or whatever he could do, cause money was needed in the house. Uh, my uncle the same thing. My aunt was permitted to go to school till she went to junior high school. And then I had another aunt that was born here, in this country. Um. And then uh, my father, you know, whatever it was, he grew. And then he went into being a salesman in the, the pleating industry. I don't know if

LEVINE: Hm. Um-hum.

MINKOFF: If you know what that is

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: Pleated skirts and things like that. The comp-- I, I remember this pretty clearly. He went to work-- I didn't know him, ya know, I wasn't born yet, - but my father went to work and he was called Billy Pan, Billy Panser [ph] because that was the name of the company. Panser [ph] Pleating. And he was a good salesperson. But he, uh, I remember pictures of my dad, he wore spats. And he wore

LEVINE: (laughs)

MINKOFF: Like a waist coat when he went to work. He was pretty sharp. Uh, and then, along, then he went, the business went bust. I don't know why. The business went bust and he went into the furrier business. And, the day, I'm told, the week he finally went to work in the industry, they went on a, year strike. There was this big strike in the furrier industry, to unionize it at that time. He didn't have a job and, uh, he was out of work. And I don't know, he did odd jobs or whatever he could do. I don't recall what year that was. I'm not even sure if I was born yet. My brother, I think, was born already. My brother's nine years older than I am. And, um, I think there were some very hard times. Uh, and, then my father went to work in the, as a presser. No. First he went in the WPA

LEVINE: Oh right.

MINKOFF: And then he went to work as a presser in ladies' dresses. He went to work in the Bronx for a contractor. He worked there for sixty something years.

LEVINE: Oh.

MINKOFF: For the same people. Same people. Off and on because they didn't always have work.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: So he worked off and on, off and on. So.

LEVINE: Huh.

MINKOFF: Uh. And uh, he, uh, basically had a simple, simple life. He did not, uh, he didn't ask for much. Not the most ambitious man, but my mother inhibited him for that because he was, she needed him to work close to home. So he used to work, he couldn't get, he could have gotten jobs in the, in Manhattan because he also helped form the, uh, International Ladies Garment Workers Union.

LEVINE: Oh.

MINKOFF: He was one of the first guys to. I remember my father coming home bleeding one day, all beat up from the, uh-- he was an interesting guy, my dad. He got beat up. One day he got arrested because, when he, I remember (laughs) this. Um, when he pressed a dress, for each dress, there was like two tickets. You know. Like in a cleaning store.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: So he would rip-- one of the tickets would stay on the dress and one he would rip off. And for that, he would turn it in at the end of the week. And he would get his penny a dress or two cents a dr-- or whatever they paid him, ya know, to press the dress. So he came home and I remember looking out the window and remember two cops arresting him 'cause they thought he was a bookmaker. 'Cause they thought he was handing out the policy slips, you know, the numbers.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: And then when they found it, they thought that's what he was doing. So they arrested him for ah, being a

LEVINE: Bookmaker.

MINKOFF: A pol- a bookmaker. And he wasn't. He just had, you know, he never went to jail. But they took all his tickets away from him and he couldn't get paid that week. And, uh, we had some hard times, but I, I don't want to get into all that.

LEVINE: OK.

MINKOFF: So anyway, um, he, uh, and that's that's what he did. Ya know. And he lived that way until he finally retired at age seventy-two, seventy-three.

LEVINE: Wow

MINKOFF: And then he became ill and he died at seventy-nine. Uh, so, but he was a very simple, simple man. Very basic guy.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: The only thing he ever wanted from his children was very strange. He never want, he didn't care whether we went to school. He didn't care whether we went to college. He didn't care any-- he wanted us to have a job, a family, and a house. Always, buy a house. He never lived in a house. We always lived in an apartment. But, that was my dad.

LEVINE: Huh.

MINKOFF: So, now let me get into the interesting part.

LEVINE: Yeah, OK. Now, um, so now we're gonna say somebody put the name on the Wall of Honor.

MINKOFF: I did. I did.

LEVINE: You did. And, uh, and as a result of that, what happened?

MINKOFF: As a result, I don't know how many years later, but uh, whatever it was later on, about maybe five years or something like that. Somebody was visiting Ellis Island and saw the name. The person who was visiting, his name was Sam Minkow. Lived in Tampa. Somehow he tracked me down. Called me. Asked me some questions about certain people. I said, 'Yeah those are my relatives.' I had a relative Joe, who was my grandfather's brother, who lived in New Jersey. And another brother, Peshka [ph], I don't know, Paul, I guess they might call him, lived also in New Jersey. That's where they moved because they became moving men. Uh, they had a moving business. You know, van, uh, household furniture. So they- and then he asked me about this person, I don't know 'em. And that person. I said 'Yeah those, I think those are relatives of mine.' I mean I don't know, my brother would know better than me. He's older than me. So I contacted my brother and he told me 'Yeah this one did this, this one did that.' I said 'I think we got a distant relative here somewhere, you--' I, I don't know how, but we did. So I called him up and I got, and he, he asked me to speak to his son. So his son sent me sorta like a history of the family. And it seems that in 1868, we were living some little village outside of, there were eleven brothers in this Minkow family. Alright?

LEVINE: Um-hm

MINKOFF: And the mother and father. And sometime in that time frame, two of the brothers fell in love with the same woman in the little village. And there was a big fight in the family between the brothers because one sided with one brother and other brothers sided with the other brother.

LEVINE: OK, yeah

MINKOFF: OK. And the brother that the woman went to, you know, fell in love with, whatever, and married, they stayed and four or five, I'm not sure. He's not sure of the amount- left the village and moved to another village. Keeping the name. On this side was, apparently, my great-grandfather.

LEVINE: Hmm.

MINKOFF: On this side. Who married the woman and gave birth to my grandfather. Alright?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: So now, the family history is there. They're related but they separated.

LEVINE: Separated.

MINKOFF: Alright. This family had its family, family, family, family and that family immigrated, or migrated, whatever the word, to the United States. But they came through Canada. They left Canada and moved to the Midwest. Some to a place called Southbend, Indiana. Why Jews would live in Southbend, Indiana I only found out. They went to work in the steel factories there. That was a job. It was good pay and whatever. And so they hired them.

LEVINE: Do you have any sense of the timeframe that this, this

MINKOFF: It would be

LEVINE: Part of the family?

MINKOFF: Around the same time. In the early 1900s.

LEVINE: OK.

MINKOFF: Alright. So. Now they came and whatever. And it's a short story, because what happens is it turns out, I have three hundred relatives living in Indiana.

LEVINE: Wow.

MINKOFF: Alright. And my relatives, what's left of us, live here. The Minkoffs don't have many, much family on this side. Uh. They're all gone now. Most of them are gone, except for my first, couple of my first cousins. That's about it. 'Cause all the brothers and sisters are gone. They're all, ya know, they died.

LEVINE: Now, the brother who married the woman from the village, that was your side or the other side?

MINKOFF: That was my side.

LEVINE: Your side.

MINKOFF: My uncle, my grandfather Harry's

LEVINE: Father

MINKOFF: It would be my grandfather Harry's father. So that

LEVINE: And mother

MINKOFF: Yeah, Father and mother, yeah, father and mother. They never came to this country. Because, I think they died over there. I, I wouldn't, you know, my uncle, my grandfather never told me that part of the story.

LEVINE: Did your grandfather ever tell you anything about his mother and father?

MINKOFF: Very little, only that they were, uh, my grandmother was a short, heavy woman who always was a good cook. And, and my grandfather was a brick maker. That's what he took his son into. I guess the son and the son and whatever it was. (laughs) Ya know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: He came the brick maker. So, we had, that was the, that was basically, ya know, the story. We contacted one another. We were supposed to get it together, but no reunion was ever put together. So, I don't even know what's going on after that, as far as that's concerned.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: So, that that's basically, you know. It was because of the Ellis Island, I found out that I have about three hundred relatives somewhere in the United States, that are-- that are connected with-- to me.

LEVINE: Do you, do you feel like you really want to, I mean, it's a wonderful story. Does, do you feel like you want to pursue it? You know, like a personal contact.

MINKOFF: I think I'm going to, because, I guess at my age. And my brother. I think because we're almost at the end. The family, I mean. We're all, except for our children, ya know. My son is the only Minkoff from my side. My brother has one son, Ziminkoff. [ph]

LEVINE: This is your older brother?

MINKOFF: My older brother. But the problem is, is that the rest are daughters. On, ya know, my cousins all have daughters, all married because they were women and they married men. So they, the Minkoff name is, basically gone, with respect to the immediate, the immediate family.

LEVINE: How did, how did the other members of your side, uh, take this news?

MINKOFF: Uh, my brother was interested. My cousins were, uh, could care less.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: They, they had no real desire. Ya know, no real desire to contact them or anything like that. And maybe because, my, let's see, I have one cousin who's eighty years old and another one who's eighty-one. [static noise] So, not really.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: You know, at this point, care.

LEVINE: I mean, I'd be interested to know, like if, if there are family traits, ya know, that, that showed up

MINKOFF: No.

LEVINE: In

MINKOFF: I, I only know that Sam told me, it's yes, it is interesting, um, um. I'll give ya something interesting.

LEVINE: M'OK.

MINKOFF: One of them, that became, that came here and was naturalized, uh, I'll, let me put it this way. One of them, living in Southbend, alright, his name was Alex. He married a Dora Friedman. Now, Dora was my grandmother's name.

LEVINE: Oh.

MINKOFF: Russia. So it's the irony. Russia was translated to Dora for here, Don't, Deborah or Dora. She called herself Dora. My cousin named her daughter Dale, from the Dora.

LEVINE: Dora.

MINKOFF: You know, Dora. So that's how it came. Uh, but, um, it's also interesting, that some of the people living in Indiana, places like Mishakowa [ph] Indiana, these little towns who are Orthodox. They were an Orthodox family. I'm not Orthodox. Nobody in my family's Orthodox. Um. They took the name Minkoff. Some took the name Minkoff. Some kept the name Minkow.

LEVINE: Now why would they have

MINKOFF: I don't know

LEVINE: come to Minkoff?

MINKOFF: I have no idea. That's what I've been trying to find out. Why did they become Minkoff? They, they came on the Rotterdam in 1911 to the Halifax, Nova Scotia. Is how they came in.

LEVINE: Oh.

MINKOFF: They uh, here, the original who came here of the women was Rose Minkow. Alright?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

MINKOFF: She came in here and then she gave birth to uh, a Manny, a Hirsh, an Ashik, a Nachum. She had an, she brought with her a Gittel and look at the names that they became here. Manny became Max. Hirsh became Harry. Anshik became Irving. Nachum became David. And Gittel became Anne

LEVINE: (laughs)

MINKOFF: So that was their names. I have no idea what our names were (both laugh) originally.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: 'Cause nobody's around to tell me that. They lived longer and kept more of a historic record of what was going on. I, I have no idea, ya know.

LEVINE: So tell me what you have by way of information. You have this family history from the people in Indiana.

MINKOFF: Right. Oh and they also came through Liverpool too. They're here. They're listed in, on the ship the S. S. Caramania through Liverpool.

LEVINE: [not understood] It sounds like

MINKOFF: It may have been. Well, they came later. They came in '28.

LEVINE: Oh.

MINKOFF: They left Riga in '28 and arrived this, this part of the family, there's so many. This is another brother, who lived in Borisov. So this could have been a-- a brother of my great-grandfather. (laughs). Ya know? I don't know.

LEVINE: Right.

MINKOFF: These people didn't know either. They tracked down as much as they could, but they, they didn't know, ya know, they whole history of it.

LEVINE: Well, if the original story is true about the separation of the brothers, as far as you know, only your father, well no wait, your grandfather was the brother and- is that the family that had?

MINKOFF: My grandfather's father is the one that married the woman that created the schism in the family.

LEVINE: OK. But how many children were there of your father's, like, siblings? Brothers.

MINKOFF: Oh, how many? My father?

LEVINE: Your grandfather.

MINKOFF: My grandfather had four brothers. He had four brothers and four sisters, but the sisters died, ya know, at a young age.

LEVINE: OK, so how many brothers

MINKOFF: Finally came?

LEVINE: [not understood]

MINKOFF: My grandfather and two brothers.

LEVINE: Came to the New York.

MINKOFF: United States. Yes. One brother stayed in Russia

LEVINE: So it's one?

MINKOFF: No one ever knew what happened.

LEVINE: And that must be then the brother that came through Canada?

MINKOFF: Could've been.

LEVINE: And

MINKOFF: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. He, he stayed in Russia. The brothers that came through Canada were brothers that went in support of the other brother that fell in love but didn't marry the girl and they left.

LEVINE: So how many of them were there?

MINKOFF: There must have been five. There were eleven, no there were six. Six who left.

LEVINE: Oh, so the

MINKOFF: Six who left.

LEVINE: Six. So six potentially went through Canada and the Midwest.

MINKOFF: Yeah. We don't know exactly how many, but six could've come or their children could have come through Canada.

LEVINE: Right.

MINKOFF: 'Cause I don't know. It's so, I'm sure everybody has these-- these stories or myths or whatever they are. I mean but, I just found it interesting when this guy called me. That-- that's all.

LEVINE: Right.

MINKOFF: Ya know. And I'm gonna keep do-- Yeah. I'll probably track it down a little more.

LEVINE: And how bout, you said your son looked into the family history?

MINKOFF: Well my son, I don't know how he did it, but it looks like he went through the census. He went into the hall of the, at the-- uh

LEVINE: Archives?

MINKOFF: In the archives, in Washington.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: And he started looking through the census rolls. And uh, here's where he has as summary that he did from the 1920s is the best he could get. And it says Harry and Gussie . Now Gussie was my grandmother. That's how they knew her in Russia. As Gussie. Don't ask how it became Russia to Dora. I don't know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: Alright. They were both born in Russia, in Belarus, in a town called Borisovov. Borisov. Alright?

LEVINE: OK.

MINKOFF: Uh, he was my grandfather, was born in 1879. So this is very plausible, because the schism took place in 1868. And he got married so that was ten years later. So something, you know, there were other brothers that were born. He was born, but he had two older brothers.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: Pin-Pinchas, or, whatever his name was. Paul.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: And the other one was, was Yudel, Yudel or Yussel or something like that. His name was Joe.

LEVINE: (laughs)

MINKOFF: OK.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: Both were drunks. That I remember. Both of them could drink. Whooh!

LEVINE: (laughs)

MINKOFF: Homemade liquor, they would make. Yeah, they had three brothers. He had three brothers. So there was four.

LEVINE: OK

MINKOFF: OK. Uh, one of the brothers lived in, [not understood] now. It's Willy, man, a bootlegger, and a character. Badadadada. However, the youngest child, a Sarah, that's my aunt, Sarah was born in the United States. She's the only citizen. My father never became-oh, no he never became a citizen. Neither did my uncle or my aunt. I do not know why. They never became citizens.

LEVINE: Huh.

MINKOFF: My grandfather did. But, for whatever reasons, I don't know. Um, they arrived in England and then on to Ellis Island, on the Lusitania. Gussie,

that was my grandmother, she, ok, she had two sisters, Cecilia and Rose. OK. My mother and father they had four children, Willy, Max, Celia and Sarah. Willy, Max, and Celia were born in Russia. Celia in this country. Sarah in this country. Uh, and maybe you want another bottle of water?

LEVINE: No.

(break in tape)

(long gap)

END SIDE A, TAPE ONE. BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE ONE.

MINKOFF: That's about all he was able-Willy was a salesman and Max was a shipper of caps. Sarah and Celia went to school at the time. Oh, my father became, I see,. He was a salesman on pleats, or waists they called at the time. And I don't know. Then my mother's side of the family was another story altogether. They were, they were a bunch of revolutionaries. They were all in jail at some time or another.

LEVINE: Really?

MINKOFF: In this country

LEVINE: In this country?

MINKOFF: And in Russia.

LEVINE: And in Russia.

MINKOFF: Yeah. They were always, except my grandfather, who I'm named for, Berel. He was the-- he was the intellect of the family. And he was the reader and he was the very quiet man. I never knew him. I wish I did. My son is like him, I'm told.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: Uh, let me see.

LEVINE: This is the son who gathered this information?

MINKOFF: Yeah, my son is very much like him. Not necessarily an intellectual but studious. He likes to look and if you tell him something, he's-- he wants to find out.

LEVINE: Find out.

MINKOFF: What goes on. Um, that was, that was it. My grandfather Berel took on the name Benny. They owned a candy store. There's an interesting story about, I think, I don't even have the photos anymore. Maybe I do or don't. When my mother left Russia, my great-grandfather, her grandfather, would that be? Her grandfather. Right. If he?

LEVINE: Uh-hm.

MINKOFF: Said that he would not, would not die until he stood on the czar's palace's, uh, the czar's, uh, what do you call that?

LEVINE: Palace steps?

MINKOFF: No. Not on the steps. The balcony.

LEVINE: Balcony. Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: The balcony. And excuse my language. He was gonna piss on the balcony.

LEVINE: Oh.

MINKOFF: And there's a picture of him.

LEVINE: Doing that?

MINKOFF: Yeah.

LEVINE: (laughs)

MINKOFF: And we—he-- he was an interesting guy. I mean, my, my, that was an interesting side of the family. I had two uncles, Wallace and Alan. Alan was a musician. Wallace was a, uh, a union organizer, a painter. I mean, he was, always getting arrested for something, ya know. Organizations and things like that. He was an interesting man. I had an interesting family.

LEVINE: So they were the intellectual side, on your mother's?

MINKOFF: That was, yeah. On my mother's side was more the intellectual side. My father was always saying, 'Stay out of trouble. Don't get [not understood].' So my brother is like my father.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: My brother is very much, much, much more successful. Very ambitious. Very successful man. College educated and so forth. My brother is much more stable than I am. And, and he's, I'm more like my uncles.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: The revolutionary, ya know, the ultra liberal.

LEVINE: Liberals.

MINKOFF: And so forth and so forth.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: And, and uh, ya know, always getting involved in organizations and all that kind of stuff.

LEVINE: Do you think your mother passed along some kinds of attitudes or values that have to do with that?

MINKOFF: Um, maybe? But not a lot. My, yeah, maybe. Maybe, my mother was a bit of a joiner. And she was active in the P.T.A. and things like that and so forth. But, maybe there was, ya know, uh, I was fortunate in one way. I don't know how you want to look at, but my mother, um-- because of whatever insecurities-- whatever like that, she used to drag me, most kids in elementary school. I got an unusual education. My mother would take me every Wednesday to another Broadway show.

LEVINE: (sighs)

MINKOFF: We would go to the matinees on Wednesday. I'd skip school. She'd take me out of school to take me to 'em, cause she didn't want to go by herself. So she would schlep me, to take me. I was in elementary school and she would take me to a Broadway show. I've seen, I can't tell ya how many Broadway shows. I don't even know. Or, she would take me. My father would belong to a lodge, I don't remember, the Odd Fellows or something like that. I don't remember the exact one. And my dad would have meetings on, uh, I guess once a month, on Friday. On the Lower East side. And there was always two or three Jewish theaters. I don't know if you're familiar with that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: And my mother would schlep me to these Jewish theaters. And that's where I would see people like Menashe Skolnick and the Adlers and all the-- I don't remember the names of the other people.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: Uh, I even saw that guy who used to be that T.V. show when he was a young man. I was a kid, he was, he was Fivo, Fivo [ph] something or other his name is. He was in Boston Legal. He was in something

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: One of the T.V. shows. Not Boston Legal, Boston Public, or something.

LEVINE: Huh.

MINKOFF: And, uh,

LEVINE: So does that influence you in some way, in your later life, all those Broadway shows and the Yiddish theater?

MINKOFF: Maybe indirectly. It always gave me something, I always loved the music and things like that, ya know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: I'm much more into the music and the arts than my brother is.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: Ya know. My wife and I love to go to music. We love to go to the theater. We like to go to museums. we like to go to things like that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: I'm not very, I mean, I don't look at a painting and say "Ooh, ya know, this that and the other thing." But I do enjoy, ya know, that kind of stuff.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah. So, did your, um, grandfather or your father ever talk about being American? Being in this country, even though there wasn't

MINKOFF: My father loved this country. He loved this country. This was, you could not say (laughs) anything about this country to my father. My grandfather, I don't-- I don't remember.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: But my father used to get on my mother all the time, cause my mother was critical, ya know. As typical as maybe a liberal person would be, my

mother would pick out the, like I do many times. Ya know, you pick the negatives. Well my father said "No way! This is, best country in the world. You can't find a better-". He loved this country.

LEVINE: And nobody ever wanted to go back? I mean, even, I mean for a visit.

MINKOFF: Not my father. My father said never. He hated Russia. He would never go back to Russia. But my mother would have gone probably because she was more, yeah my mother read, read Russian, spoke Russian, uh, lived, was able to write in Russian. So she got an education there because my grandfather, Berel, and his brothers and his father Akil, they were the book binders for the church in their town.

LEVINE: Oh.

MINKOFF: So they were allowed to read and they were allowed to learn Russian. They had to learn Russian. Most Jews were not permitted to read or write or they had to go to their, their own little Jewish schools in, in, in whatever little shtetels they lived in, ya know. So, my father only knew Yiddish and knew nothing about-- uh, Russian. But my mother did speak Russian. I mean, uh, later life she forgot it cause she had nobody to talk to or read to. My mother did read, read and write Russian and so forth. And she would, once in a blue moon, read the uh, Russian newspapers. But uh, but the big papers at our house were, because of my mother, were papers called, oh, when we were younger I remember it was a paper called, I shouldn't even be saying this because I could be branded, was, was papers like The Daily Worker, if you ever knew of that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: But the Fi,fi,fi, Freiheit I think it was called. And The Forward.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: And I mean, all those of kind of papers always made their way into my house.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: We always had that-- that, my mother was always reading them. I wasn't, but my mother was reading these papers. And The Forward was in Jewish.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: So she, ya know, she was big on that stuff. But my father hated it.

LEVINE: He wanted American, he wanted to be Americanized?

MINKOFF: Yeah. He was American, ya know what I mean. My mother would speak Yiddish, my father would speak English. So, it was, it was not, uh

LEVINE: Huh.

MINKOFF: And then my dad was a little man. He was five foot five, by five foot five.

LEVINE: (laughs)

MINKOFF: For me he was, uh, just a quiet guy. Quiet, loving guy, ya know. He didn't, he, if he didn't have a nickel in his pocket, he didn't care. Really.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: He, he made do. We didn't. But he made do with his life, ya know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MINKOFF: He was fine with that. And I guess my grandfather must've been pretty much the same. I, I really don't. They never were, I mean they had, I remember my, the grandfather's, the Seders and things like that in my grandfather's house. Strict man. Very str-- My grandfather was a strict man. My father was not a strict man. My father was a very loose guy, I mean. He didn't care what you did.

LEVINE: But your mother is the one who pushed maybe?

MINKOFF: She di-she pushed, [not understood] for different reasons. (microphone noises)

LEVINE: OK.

MINKOFF: She pushed for different reasons.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: My mother was not an an,a. Uh, she had too many insecurities, too many hang ups, too much baggage that she carried. But my, uh, my father was very easy going. Terrific. I wish I would have known my grandmother, on my, uh, father's side. I didn't know her. I wish she was, I was three or four when she died.

LEVINE: She died.

MINKOFF: But I'm told she was a phenomenal woman. (microphone noises). Also she was like, four eleven. She was a fantastic lady, I was told.

LEVINE: Huh.

MINKOFF: But my grandmother that I knew, on my mother's side, she was in Russia. She was in her (microphone noises) little village. She was uh-- an opera singer. And uh, what else did she do? She was an opera singer.

(heard off microphone) Still being recorded?

MINKOFF: Yeah but we're almost done.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: And uh, something else. (microphone noises) And I don't remember exactly what else she did.

LEVINE: An opera singer, wow.

MINKOFF: Yeah she was, she was. She, I remember her when, in,--she would sing. What a voice from this lady. What a voice. She was incredible. And uh, then she came to this country. And when she came, she didn't read. She couldn't read. She couldn't write. Alright?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: Nothing. Ran a very successful candy store.

LEVINE: (laughs)

MINKOFF: My grandfather would sit in the candy store, I'm told, and read. And my grandmother would run the business. That's the way it was, my father, my, my brother who's nine years older than me, would tell me all the time "Grandma ran the business".

LEVINE: (laughs)

MINKOFF: 'And grandpa read his books.'

LEVINE: Read the books.

MINKOFF: Right. And grandpa, every now and then would look up and nod. That's how my fath-- my brother-- ya know, would describe it. But my grandmother ran the business. When people came in and said "Give me a pack of Camels," she knew. Lucky Strikes? She knew. What ever. Couldn't read it, but she knew.

(something heard off tape)

MINKOFF: I guess the pictures. But ya know, they would sell cigarettes loose in those years.

LEVINE: Oh.

MINKOFF: I gather, you may be too young.

LEVINE: I don't remember that.

MINKOFF: They would sell cigarettes three for a penny at that, in that, that time. And it was, um, more lucrative to do that than to sell a pack, cause a pack was a nickel.

LEVINE: Ah. Yeah. Right.

MINKOFF: So it was more lucrative. So they would break the packs and sell the cigarettes loose. It was interesting.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: I, I do remember something. When I was very, very young, I'll tell ya one last thing.

LEVINE: OK.

MINKOFF: (aside) You remember this a little bit, aren't you? You must have, no maybe not, [not understood] (into microphone) I remember sitting there at the counter. And I remember these old men coming into the store. Always asking for a chocolate soda.

(heard off microphone) Egg creams. You know egg creams?

MINKOFF: (aside) OK. An egg cream

LEVINE: Yeah.

MINKOFF: (aside) And, no-- no, chocolate soda. Chocolate soda, not an egg cream. Chocolate soda.

LEVINE: (laughs)

MINKOFF: And then after she would get halfway down, she'd say, they say "It's too sweet. Would ya put a little more seltzer in there?"

LEVINE: (laughs)

MINKOFF: And I remember my grandmother screaming at these men.

LEVINE: (laughs)

(heard off microphone) [not understood]

MINKOFF: No, no, they must've [not understood]. Screaming at them to get out of the store. (laughs) Screaming at them to get out of that store. And I remember my aunt Esther introducing me to her three, friends. These were guys, just before they went off to World War II.

LEVINE: Oh. Hm.

MINKOFF: I don't remember their names. But I remember them teaching me, to this day I can, it's amazing I can still say to you "Hit the road you bum. And shoot the hershey to me murshy [ph]." Do you remember that? At all? No?

LEVINE: I remember the first one. Yeah.

MINKOFF: Shoot the hershey to me murshy.[ph] That was, I don't know where they got it from. I still remember that.

LEVINE: Huh.

MINKOFF: Still remember that. Anyway, that's it. I don't what else.

LEVINE: OK, well, I think this is great. And um, I wish you well in.

MINKOFF: You too! I hope you get back alright.

(both laugh)

LEVINE: OK. Well

MINKOFF: You know how to get back from here, don't ya?

LEVINE: Well, I'll figure it out.

MINKOFF: OK.

LEVINE: Ok. So I've been speaking with Ben Minkoff, who was telling about his family and how the Wall of Honor at Ellis Island played a role in finding a whole other side. And also, an interesting story about the family history. OK, this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW