

EI-185

HARRY SINGER (GIRSHKOV ZINGERMAN)

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THE UKRAINE, 1920

AGE 12

PASSAGE ON "THE AQUITANIA"

PORT OF EMBARKATION:

RESIDENCES: UKRAINE: BEREZDOV

US: PEABODY, MA

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm here today with Harry Singer, who came from Russia and his name then Girshkov, which later became Harry; and Zingerman, which later became Singer. He was twelve years old when he arrived in the United States from Russia, and he had to make a circuitous route before landing in the United States after leaving Russia. Today is June 26th, 1992, and I'm here in Mr. Singer's home in Lynn, Massachusetts. I'm very happy to be here and I'm very happy that you agreed to tell your story on tape for the Ellis Island Museum Library.

SINGER: Yes. Thank you.

LEVINE: So, let me begin by asking you your birth date.

SINGER: My birth date is February the 10th, 1909.

LEVINE: And, where were you born?

SINGER: I was born in a little town called Berezdov, and it's in the Ukraine.

LEVINE: Oh, in the Ukraine. And can you spell Berezdov ?

SINGER: B-E-R-E-Z-D-O-V.

LEVINE: And did you live in Berezdov until you left for America?

SINGER: Until I left for America, yes.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember it?

SINGER: Yes, I remember the town. It was little, little town, and (laughs) all the Jewish people were settled in the center of the town, and little houses all around the town, and in the central, the center of the town, they had the stores, where the people used to come, buy goods. And then every once in a while there would be a bazaar, some kind of a bazaar, where the peasants from all around the towns would come, would come together and sell their products.

LEVINE: Do you remember what they sold particularly?

SINGER: Yeah, they sold vegetables and grain, also livestock; so that's how they used to trade with each other.

LEVINE: Now were the shops mostly Jewish-run?

SINGER: Yeah, the shops were mostly Jewish in this particular area. In fact, they were all Jewish, yes.

LEVINE: And was the town proportionately a mix of Jewish and non-Jewish? Was it an equal mix or...

SINGER: No, the town itself, where the Jews lived in one section, they were all Jews. And around the town, the Russians or Ukrainians lived. And they had farms around, and they used to raise grains and vegetables and livestock. That's how most of the towns were in those days.

LEVINE: Were the farms big farms, and peasants worked for other people?

SINGER: No, no, the peasants, they owned their own farms in those days and there was, before the Communist regime took over, where they communized all their farms afterwards. In those days the farmers had their own little plots of ground and they used to farm and make a living out of it.

LEVINE: Do you remember the house you lived in?

SINGER: Yes, I remember the house; a small house and I lived with my grandfather who was the cantor of the town, of the synagogue in that little, particular town. And we also lived, my mother was with me, my two sisters, and we also had, had three cousins came to live with us. Their mother had died in a different part of Russia. So they came to live with us because their father was in this country. And we used to receive money from my father who was in this, who was in America. So we can make a liv, yeah, to live on.

LEVINE: I see. How old were you when your father left for America?

SINGER: I was three years old.

LEVINE: Oh, so you didn't really remember him.

SINGER: I didn't remember him at all, no.

LEVINE: And, what was your grandfather's name?

SINGER: It was Mendel Kordish.

LEVINE: How do you spell Kordish?

SINGER: K-O-R-D-I-S-H.

LEVINE: He was your mother's father?

SINGER: He was my mother's father, yes.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

SINGER: Ida, Ida.

LEVINE: And Kordish was her maiden name.

SINGER: Maiden name, yes.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

SINGER: It was Oscar (pause) Zingerman, actually.

LEVINE: And your sisters?

SINGER: Yeah, one was, cause she's, my sister was Fannie and Dora.

LEVINE: And your cousins?

SINGER: The names? Yeah, one was Isak, Avraham, and Gene.

LEVINE: And their last name?

SINGER: Kordish, 'cause they were, they were a Kordish.

LEVINE: Were they older than you?

SINGER: Yeah, they were, the two brothers, the two boys were older than I, than me, and their sister was a little young, two years younger, a year and a half.
(background noise) That's my wife. (interview pauses)

LEVINE: We're resuming now, after a little interruption here.

SINGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So the house, can you describe it, where you lived?

SINGER: Yeah. Well it's (clears throat) a little wooden house, and it had one floor, and there was a kitchen, which also had an oven, where they did all their baking. And, there was, like a little living room and two bedrooms. And we used to have an oven, a small oven used to go round the house itself for heat in the wintertime, that used to heat a little oven that would supply the heat for the winter.

LEVINE: Let me just stop this for a minute. (interview pauses) Okay, we're resuming now. You were saying about the house where you lived.

SINGER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Would you say that you were as well off as most of the people in the town or were you...?

SINGER: I would say I was average, on the average, I was. Yeah. There were some, some people who were wealthier than us and they had more money. Also there were some people who were poorer than we were. 'Course we used to get money from America, from my father and from my uncle.

LEVINE: I see, that was your father's brother?

SINGER: That was my mother's brother. His name was Kordish. My father's name was Zingerman. 'Cause when he came to this country he changed it to Singer. That's why I'm Singer now, too.

LEVINE: Now, did your mother work ever? Or was she at home?

SINGER: No, she was at home. She ran the whole house, 'cause there so many children; and she also had two sisters that were in this country and there was another sister who lived with us before she got married.

LEVINE: I see. So was it your father's plan to return or was it his plan to send, then, for the family?

SINGER: No, his plan, actually, was to send for the family, eventually.

LEVINE: Well, your grandfather was a cantor, were you a religious family?

SINGER: Oh, yeah, sure.

LEVINE: What do you remember about religious observance in the Ukraine?

SINGER: Well, we observed all the orthodox, religious laws. We kept the Sabbath, nothing was done on the Sabbath. We used to go the synagogue twice a day and, of course, I was enrolled in a school, they call it, it's not exactly a Hebrew School, they call it a chadah, that is a gathering of children where they stay practically all day to learn from a rabbi. He wasn't a trained teacher but he they used to call him a rabbi where he would teach the children the alphabet and how to read and the Torah, you know the Jewish books, and everything is in accordance where you could pick it up.

LEVINE: Well, you stayed for a whole day at a time...

SINGER: Well, practically a whole day, yeah.

LEVINE: How often would you go?

SINGER: Oh, go five, six days a week (he giggles).

LEVINE: Oh, so that was your school?

SINGER: That was the school, sure, yeah.

LEVINE: Was it only boys or were there girls there, too?

SINGER: Only boys. Girls very seldom got a Hebrew education.

LEVINE: And how many children would be with you, for example?

SINGER: Oh, about fifteen, twenty.

LEVINE: So, how many years did you attend that kind of a...

SINGER: Ah, 'til about, let's see, from, I started when I was three years old, and first I went (he stammers) the beginning they teach, what do you call it, pre-, pre-, primary teacher, for two years. And all we did was just sit around and do nothing. He would just, those three years he only taught us was the alphabet (he laughs).

LEVINE: (she laughs) This is in Hebrew, right?

SINGER: Hebrew, yeah. Then I was transferred over to another, to another teacher.

LEVINE: And then how long did you stay? Well you left when you were twelve; were you still going?

SINGER: I, no, I went 'til I was about eight or nine years old and then I stopped going because we couldn't, we didn't, it was during the war; we didn't receive any money from America. And so we didn't have any money for tuition, so I stopped going.

LEVINE: Do you have any remembrance of how much tuition was in that school?

SINGER: No, it wasn't much (he laughs).

LEVINE: Okay. Do you remember, by any chance, any of the food or dishes that your mother cooked?

SINGER: Well, there wasn't much food available; it was during the war. And we had, of course, most of the main meals were bread and butter. That was the mainstay. We had very little, even very little butter that . . . we had a cow. We used to get our own milk. We used to buy meat once in awhile. We had my uncle, he was a butcher so we would get some meat once in awhile. And, if we were lucky, we would have at night for supper, herring and potatoes. And that's about all. We had eggs, once in awhile. But, we didn't starve.

LEVINE: Did children play games? Do you remember playing games as a child?

SINGER: Yeah, we used to, we used to play games. We used to play with each other.

LEVINE: Yeah, do you remember anything, like what you would do for entertainment as a child?

SINGER: Not much, not much for entertainment. Just we used to play around, fool around, we used to chase each other. Then at night we'd come home and it was already time to go to bed (he laughs).

LEVINE: (she laughs) Did you have family gatherings? Do you remember, like what, at a family gathering, what would you do? Was there music or singing or anything?

SINGER: No, there was no music 'cause there was no radio, no television (he laughs), no movies. But I had an aunt, she used to play the guitar; so once in awhile she would play the guitar. There were no pianos.

LEVINE: What are your fondest memories of that time in the Ukraine?

SINGER: My fondest memories? Don't quite remember (he laughs).

LEVINE: Is there anything that when you think about it, you feel good about it?

SINGER: Feel good about? The fact is just we were alive and we were kickin'. That's all. (he laughs).

LEVINE: How did it get decided that you would come?

SINGER: Oh. We always wanted to come here but during the war we couldn't get out. So we were, we lived not far from the border between Poland. It was called, there's a town called Rovner. So they could send money to Poland. So we had a relative in Rovner, used to receive letters for us from my father. Then my mother would sneak out and go there.

LEVINE: She'd have to sneak over the border?

SINGER: Over the border, yeah. And, then, it was decided they would send us money and, if we can cross the border, enough money to pay for our way to this country. So, was 19 . . ., must have been '19, probably '20 at that time, when we decided to leave already. So we, there was a group of people, who wanted to go, who all going to America. So you all get it together and at night you snuck out of the little town and cross over the border...

LEVINE: Were you on foot?

SINGER: No, we had wagons, wagons. And we, and of course the border was there border guards and the border guards heard us, so they started shooting (he laughs), and so we stopped. And my uncle had some money with him, so

he bought 'em off. And they let us go. And the following day we were in Poland already. And then we went to Rovner and there was a railroad station there. And we stayed there for awhile and from there we went, by train, to Warsaw.

LEVINE: Did you stay there a matter of days or weeks or...?

SINGER: In Rovner? Well, no, about a couple of, yeah, about three or four weeks.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that?

SINGER: It was quite a quite a strange, strange to me because it was the first big, like a first big city that I ever saw, and the first station that I ever saw, railroad train.

LEVINE: Do you remember, as a twelve year old, how it struck you? What struck you?

SINGER: It struck me, yeah, it was, I was amazed that they can have trains going without, without being pulled by horses (he laughs).

LEVINE: And so, after a few weeks, then you went on to Warsaw?

SINGER: (a constant droning background noise begins here) To Warsaw, from there we, we had to wait for our visa for about eight months. We had to go

according to when your turn came. So we rented a place in a little town called Otvoock, near Warsaw.

LEVINE: Can you spell that?

SINGER: O-T-V-O-O-C-K. And we stayed there for about eight months and we lived well, we received money from my father, 'til we got a visa. And from there, after living there for eight months. we went to Germany. From Germany we went to Belgium; Belgium we, I think we took a boat to Liverpool. And Liverpool, we, went on the Aquitania, big ship, and from there we sailed to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: What did you do for the eight months when you were in Warsaw?

SINGER: Well we just did nothing (he laughs). Lollled around. It was a nice place. In fact, it was a vacation place for the people, and we lived well.

LEVINE: Do you remember that as a good time?

SINGER: Oh yes, it was a very good time.

LEVINE: Now, who was travelling with you?

SINGER: Well, of course, my mother, my two sisters, my three cousins, and my aunt and uncle.

LEVINE: So you left your grandfather...?

SINGER: My grandfather died in 1918. He did died, yeah.

LEVINE: So you were there eight months and then you left. And then were you processed or were you examined by the steamship company before you set sail, that you remember?

SINGER: Yes, I think so. We were examined by the Americans, the doctors and so forth to make sure that you're all right before we left.

LEVINE: And what was the voyage like?

SINGER: It was a voyage of about two or three weeks and we were on the ship. And the voyage was good. 'Course sometimes it was a little turbulent and we used to go out on the deck and watch the whales, you know.

LEVINE: Were you in steerage?

SINGER: Yes, I would say so, yeah.

LEVINE: And how about the food? Do you remember that?

SINGER: The food was good. Yeah, very good.

LEVINE: Did they give you food where you were sleeping or did you go to a dining room, do you remember?

SINGER: (pause) I think we, that I don't quite remember. I think they gave us food where we were sleeping. There was no common dining room.

LEVINE: And do you remember any incidents of things that happened aboard the ship on the route?

SINGER: No. We, I remember there used to be the (pause) like a supply house, we would never, we would go and ask for oranges, because we never had oranges before. I'd never tasted them before, ate them before. So they would give us oranges and other kinds of fruit.

LEVINE: And did you like them?

SINGER: Yeah, sure.

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

SINGER: Yeah, yah, I remember we came into the New York Harbor, we saw the Statue of Liberty. Everybody was on deck and everybody was happy.

LEVINE: Did you know what the Statue of Liberty was before?

SINGER: No, I didn't know what it was before I went.

LEVINE: And how about, do you remember what you thought or expected about America before you actually touched land?

SINGER: Well, it was all very vague, didn't expect anything, didn't know what was coming, and didn't even think about it.

LEVINE: So then you came to Ellis Island. Do you remember what your impression of that was and what happened to you there?

SINGER: Yeah. Well, at Ellis Island, of course they processed us, they examined us, and they looked mostly for lice in our hair and in other people, and if you were sick or something like that. But, thank God, all of us were well and they let us go. We, I don't know, we stayed in Ellis Island probably a day or two and from there we took a little boat to New York. From New York we took a train to Boston.

LEVINE: Now, who met you?

SINGER: They had guides (pause) at that time and they put labels on us when they boarded us on the train to Boston, to show that we were immigrants, couldn't speak English, and people would help us to get around.

LEVINE: Were people helpful to you?

SINGER: Yeah, people were helpful, yeah.

LEVINE: Did you have any negative experiences because you were immigrants and couldn't speak? Did you get taken advantage of in any way?

SINGER: Not exactly, no, no.

LEVINE: So then when did you meet up with your father?

SINGER: Well we came in, the first day we came to Peabody, that's when we met, when I met my father. He already had arranged for us a tenement. I said we came to Peabody first, yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember what it was like for you to meet your father for seemingly the first time?

SINGER: First time, sure. It was very exciting (laughs). Didn't know what to expect (laughs). I didn't know how to approach him.

LEVINE: And was he what you expected or did he surprise you in any ways or...?

SINGER: Well, no he didn't, actually, I mean, I don't want to say that but he, it wasn't really what I expected (they laugh).

LEVINE: You remember what you did expect?

SINGER: Well, I don't know. I expected a young, lively man, you know, but, of course my father was worker, he worked all his life and just took things easily, and that's all.

LEVINE: Well was your mother very excited? Do you remember her reunion with your father and what she felt about coming here?

SINGER: Well, she was very happy.

LEVINE: Let's see, then did you start school here?

SINGER: Yeah, I started school in Peabody; there was a special class for immigrant children. I stayed in the special class for about two or three months and then they, afterwards they put me into the fifth grade.

LEVINE: I haven't spoken with anyone before who was in a special class for immigrant children. What was that class like?

SINGER: Well it was a class where all immigrant children that couldn't speak English, they, there was a teacher, she was very good, and she would teach us how to speak English and write. And I picked it up in about two or three months. Enough, so I could enter the fifth grade.

LEVINE: Well, in Peabody were there people from a lot of different countries?

SINGER: Lot of different countries, yes, yeah, there was a lot of Greek children. Mostly, Greek. Yeah, a few Polish children and because it was a town where they had a lot of leather factories and all the immigrants used to come to get jobs and work in the leather factories.

LEVINE: What did your father do?

SINGER: He worked in a leather factory.

LEVINE: A leather factory. And in the Ukraine, before that, what had he done?

SINGER: He was a butcher, a kosher butcher.

LEVINE: So, let's see, then your sister started school, too?

SINGER: Yeah, my sisters, not my oldest sister; yeah, she started school, she went very, very little. I don't know how long she went but then she was old enough so she can go out, so she can go to work. So she worked in a, they called, they used to have a bleachery, where they used to bleach cloth. They had a lot women employed so she went to work there because my, one salary my father couldn't support us. (the background droning ends)

LEVINE: And what were your living quarters like compared with what you had had in the Ukraine?

SINGER: Yeah, it was (pause) nice at that time, think we had four rooms, stove, old-fashioned stove, a coal stove, and we used to ... No central heating system but the stove provided heat in the winter for the cooking.

LEVINE: Was it in an apartment building? A tenement building?

SINGER: It was like a tenement, three floors, three apartments, three floors, three tenements.

LEVINE: And, let's see, (pause). How long did you stay in school?

SINGER: I stayed in school 'til I graduated high school.

LEVINE: Oh, uh hum, and...

SINGER: I went through all the grades.

LEVINE: So then what did you do after you graduated?

SINGER: Well, even when I went to school I used to work in the morning in a leather factory (pause) from six o'clock in the morning until about eight, I did this. And then I went to school. And I did this until I graduated and then I (pause)

I went to night school, accounting school. And I got a job to work in a, at the A. C. Lawrence Leather Company; was a big company. It used to be Swift and Company and I got a job in the payroll department.

LEVINE: Is that Peabody?

SINGER: Peabody, yeah. It's all gone now.

LEVINE: And then did you stay working for them or did you...?

SINGER: Yeah, I stayed there with them for forty-six years. Yeah, then I retired, yeah. I retired 1972.

LEVINE: And how about religion. Did your family remain a religious family?

SINGER: Oh yeah, we stayed, sure, we always religious, we were very religious.

LEVINE: And, let's see, how about for entertainment here. What did you do?

SINGER: Oh, we used to go to the movies. I liked to go to the movies and that's all there was in those days.

LEVINE: Well, I guess there was a radio, right?

SINGER: The radio didn't come in until about, no we didn't have a radio, no. Maybe it

came in, but I don't remember having a radio in my house. And, also you had a record player; used to play a lot of records, sure, especially cantorial records.

LEVINE: And was your, were your mother and father intent on becoming Americanized or...

SINGER: Oh, yeah, sure.

LEVINE: Did they want to keep their...

SINGER: No, they wanted to become Americanized

LEVINE: Yeah.

SINGER: 'Cause my father, he had very little education so he never became a citizen.

LEVINE: How about your mother?

SINGER: My mother, she went to night school and I believe she became a citizen, yeah.

LEVINE: And, can you think of anything that either your mother or your father, kind of values that they wanted to, wanted you to have, maybe things they taught you or sayings they had or advice they gave.

SINGER: I can't think too much. They had too much to think about making a living and they knew we, that I was going to school and I was getting an education. It was, that's all they thought about.

LEVINE: Do you think they were both happy they had come?

SINGER: Oh, yeah, they were very happy, sure.

LEVINE: And did they or anyone in your family go back to the town?

SINGER :Oh, no, no, no.

LEVINE: Your attitude was you were glad to...

SINGER: Sure, we were glad to be away from there (he laughs) because, after we left, the revolution started in Russia, you know, they had all different groups fighting with each other 'til the Communists won out and the whole Russia became Communistic.

LEVINE: Did you socialize with all kinds of groups or did you tend to socialize with people from, roughly, where you came from?

SINGER: Well, we tend to socialize with people that used to attend the same synagogue.

END OF SIDE A

BEGINNING OF SIDE B

LEVINE: How did you meet your wife?

SINGER: Met her at a dance (they laugh). In those days they used to run dances in the different halls. Like in Lynn they had YMHA and every Saturday night they have a dance where the young people would come and meet and then dance. And they also had, and in Peabody we had a social group where all the boys would come together. So we would also go to Lynn to the dances every Saturday night and that's how I met her.

LEVINE: And did you court her a long time or you...?

SINGER :It was a short courtship (he laughs).

LEVINE: And then, how many children did you have?

SINGER: Had three.

LEVINE: And what are their names?

SINGER: Their name, the first one is Deborah. The next one was Aida, A-I-D-A,

that's named after my mother. My mother's name was Aida. And the third one was a boy, name's Arthur.

LEVINE: And your wife's name and maiden name?

SINGER: Wife's name is Minnie and her maiden name was Pearlman.

LEVINE: Okay. Do you have any grandchildren?

SINGER: Yeah, we have seven grandchildren. Debby, my oldest daughter Debby, she's got two children and, unfortunately, she got divorced and she's remarried now. And, my other daughter, she went to Hebrew Teachers College in Boston; and she went, graduated art school and then from Hebrew Teachers they had a group going to Israel, so she went to Israel with a group of chil, with young people and where they went, an institute, Cheim Greenberg Institute and there she met a young man who, they married. He came from New York. He's a rabbi; he studied to be a rabbi. So they, after they married he got a job as a rabbi in Halifax, Nova Scotia. And she didn't like it and he didn't like it. So they decided to go to Israel, to live in Israel. So they moved to Israel, in 1973 or something like that (he laughs).

LEVINE: Is this your grandchild?

SINGER: My daughter, my daughter.

LEVINE: Your daughter. (telephone rings)

SINGER: And she, she's got three children. (Telephone rings again. In background Mrs. Singer answers.)

LEVINE: We're resuming again after a telephone call.

SINGER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: And you were saying about your daughter and son-in-law that live in Israel.

SINGER: Oh, yeah, they were in Israel and he got a job working for the government, the Israeli government, and so they have, got three children, and their names are Ravi, Talia, and Amia. And my son-in-law got a position as a scholar-in-residence in St. Louis, Missouri. So they're living in St. Louis, Missouri for two years. My oldest, I mean our oldest son is, finished law school in London, England.

LEVINE: And do you have great...

SINGER: No great grandchildren, no. One grandchild is married now.

LEVINE: Do you recall at all, your family or yourself, being politically involved in any way? I mean were there any issues that meant something to you, that you

stood for?

SINGER: No, I mean, in this country?

LEVINE: Yeah.

SINGER: In this country. No, no, we were politically not involved at all because we tend to be demo . . . for the Democratic party.

LEVINE: Did you have any sense of like being an immigrant, being, I don't know, for certain things or that you were forming a new nation or any sense that you were really what America (she laughs) was all about?

SINGER: Well, no, no actually we were just the other way around. The kids used to call us "greenhorns" and we sort of felt we were a little bit, we were a little bit inferior to the other people.

LEVINE: So, I think that maybe was true but I think that's changed a lot. Do you feel like that you experienced that change? So that now it's really something to be proud of.

SINGER: Yeah, absolutely, sure.

LEVINE: Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to say about, you know, starting out how you did in the Ukraine and your whole family coming here

and having a life here. When you look back on it all is there any...

SINGER: When I look back on it all I feel it was the best thing that ever happened to us is to get out of there. But, I'd like to see, I'd like to go back once in awhile, sometimes, just to see how the town is now; how it existed all these years. But I think there is a lot of changes made since I left. I think there's very few Jewish people left because the Germans came in at that time and they deported a lot of them.

LEVINE: Okay, is there anything else you can think of about your coming to this country that you might want to mention?

SINGER: No, it's, I, we, it's a country of which was (he laughs) very proud to be here and we, I tried to make a nice living for, for my family and, thank God, I raised my children and we live well now.

LEVINE: Well, I thank you very much. It's been a pleasure.

SINGER: You're welcome, yeah.

LEVINE: And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I've been talking with Harry Singer at his home in Lynn, Massachusetts, on June 26th, 1992. Signing [off].