

EI-225

JACOB AUERBACH

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ELLIS ISLAND IMMIGRATION INSPECTOR

1930-1942

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here with Jacob Auerbach on October 14, 1992 at his home in Long Beach, Long Island, New York. We have just had two tapes of Mr. Auerbach's experience as an immigrant coming from Russian Poland in 1921 at the age of eighteen. Now this tape is going to deal with Mr. Auerbach's experience nine years later, after coming to this country, of working on the other side as an immigration inspector at Ellis Island. So why don't we begin by your mentioning how it is that you came to be an immigration inspector.

AUERBACH: Well, I must say this. That as I mentioned before my job was as a clerk, my first job that I could find was as a clerk. And later on I went to night school and became, took courses in accounting and became an accounting graduate and I had a job there, but I did

not like it. I did not like the job, I did not like the pay. The most thing was it was not interesting enough. I wanted to deal with people. So I said to myself, "I have experience as an immigrant. I know what it feels like it. I know that this country, the United States of America, is built of immigrants. What can I do about it?" So I found out that they do give examinations, examinations for jobs to see whether you can qualify for whatever it is. I have even before that, even before this I worked in an office for the city as an accountant. I did not like to work for private people. There was too much chicanery going on, I found out. And I'm a straight guy, so I took an examination as a bookkeeper for the City of New York so as to get away. I liked to work for the public wheel, so to say. And I did pass the examination and I did get the job. I must say there were difficulties, even though I was number, I was number two on the list, but people used to skip me. They would appoint somebody who was below me, and I was still left out. But forgetting about that, I took an examination as an immigration inspector, figuring I may as well make use of my English and my knowledge of the languages: Yiddish and Russian, some

Polish and German, and I could also read French. I could speak French, but not too well. So I took an examination and passed it, and I received my first appointment to Ellis Island in 1930. I believe it was in January of 1930 that I became an immigrant inspector with a uniform, a grey/green uniform with brass buttons with a gold and blue badge on my breast and a military cap with insignia of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service. And puttees with the (?) trousers. Incidentally I have a picture of it if you want to see it.

LEVINE: Okay. After this, after the tape. Yeah. How did it feel to be in the uniform of an American Immigration and Naturalization Service?

AUERBACH: Well, it feels as if somebody, if a Russian were made the czar of Moscow they couldn't have felt any more exhilarated than I was, especially the work itself, to talk to people. My job was to ask them questions, find out, check their papers, find out whether they are eligible to land, whom they are going to, and so on and so forth. Not very difficult. Most of the investigators, the immigrant inspectors, I say investigators because I became an investigator later.

I wasn't an immigrant inspector all the time. I was, I worked for thirty-six years for the Immigration Service.

LEVINE: Okay, well, in the beginning.

AUERBACH: In the beginning, most of them had to use interpreters. I didn't have to. I mean, they knew my languages. Whenever they saw a Jewish name and a Polish name and a Russian name and a German name, it came to me. And I enjoyed it. It was beautiful. And the pay was very good. If I am not mistaken it was twenty-one hundred dollars a year. That was very good money in 1921.

LEVINE: 1930.

AUERBACH: In 1930, I beg your pardon. Twenty-one hundred dollars a year. And I already had, at that time I was already married and I don't, it was in September. I can't remember whether my wife was already pregnant or not. I didn't have the child. My daughter was born in '31.

LEVINE: Where did you live when you worked there?

AUERBACH: I don't recall. I don't recall the address. Oh,

yes, wait a minute. I do recall. We had an apartment in the Bronx, near central, near Bronx (?), over there. Later on, a short while later on we got an apartment in Parkchester, you know the big development in the Bronx.

LEVINE: Now, so you traveled to work in the morning.

AUERBACH: In the morning I came to the Battery Park. And there we would go on the ferryboat Ellis Island, get to Ellis Island and then start working. There were always people there who had to be inspected.

LEVINE: What were your hours like? What was a day?

AUERBACH: It was reasonable. If I remember it was nine-to-five probably. I don't remember exactly. That to me was not important. If it was nine-to-nine I would love it, too. It was good work, very interesting, meeting people, talking to them. And there was a very good comraderie between, a number of the inspectors, immigrant inspectors, were either themselves immigrants, maybe one or two or three, but most of them were sons of immigrants. Everybody had a warm feeling for the job and for this situation.

LEVINE: Would you say that the staff then dealt with the immigrants in a kindly manner?

AUERBACH: I should think so. I've heard stories about the roughness and so on. The roughness consisted of somebody who did not make it. That was tough. That was worse than killing them. But we had to be honest enough. We had to go by the law. If somebody came in and his visa was not proper, or he, the doctor found some kind of a blemish on him, something wrong with the eyes. They were afraid, the people will say the ordeal they went through was not with the immigrant inspectors. It was with the doctors. They were scared stiff. The women had to go through their hair and they found some vermin on there, found a louse. That would be putting them in quarantine. It was not, the immigration officers were not cruel. They were not accused of cruelty in any way.

LEVINE: Were there any particular situations with immigrants that you became, affected you personally?

AUERBACH: Let's put it this way. When I worked as, in this particular, I had different jobs down there, you know. This was . . .

LEVINE: Well, just on the inspector level.

AUERBACH: I'm talking now, I'm an inspector, I'm one of the inspectors now, call it immigration inspector on board ship. There was nothing much to become personal. Twice I came across some famous names, like that famous German actress.

LEVINE: Marlene Dietrich?

AUERBACH: Marlene Dietrich. She happened to be on my list, so it was quite an experience to examine her. She didn't want to come out and stand in line like all the other people do. So we had to go to her cabin, personal cabin. First class, naturally, and so on. And then I found a Russian, a Jewish singer on one of my lists. I mean, those were little things. But basically you looked at the paper and there were people waiting in line. You didn't schmooze with them. You know what schmooze is? You checked it and you stamped it "admitted," and that's all there is to it. It's a little green card.

LEVINE: Now, you went aboard ship. Did you also inspect the steerage passengers at the main building at Ellis Island?

AUERBACH: Everybody. Aboard ship, after, the ship never finished when we went aboard. It never finished because the, only the American citizens were the ones who were taken first, and then were the first class passengers, and then were the second class passengers. The steerage were the last. So it was almost always, by the time the, after the medical inspection in Staten Island, by the time the ship got to the . . .

LEVINE: The Battery.

AUERBACH: To the pier in the Hudson River, there were some left over. Like myself, I told you that's how come I spent the night aboard ship and saw the Lipton's Tea and Lipton's Cocoa and Lipton's Coffee. So these were taken the following, everybody who was not inspected aboard ship was taken to Ellis Island the following day or, if there was time enough, the same day, and they were inspected the following day.

LEVINE: Now, did Ellis Island, the main building itself, did it look the same when you came back in 1930 as it had looked when you went through Ellis Island as an immigrant in 1921?

AUERBACH: Uh, basically yes. Bear in mind that in 1921, the outside certainly looked the same, no question. It looks the same even now. I was there only a couple of months ago. But the inside, as an immigrant, I was there probably no more than an hour or two hours. I was inspected. There was no problem with my papers. I was immediately taken and told by a HIAS representative and taken to the Battery Park, and that's all I saw of Ellis Island. But as an immigrant inspector, that was a little different story. There we had the run of the place.

LEVINE: What aspects of Ellis Island did you see as an immigrant inspector that were new to you?

AUERBACH: That were new to me as a, well, the aspects as an immigrant inspector on the island proper were that you dealt with a different category of people first of all, the poorer people, okay, in the steerage. Some of them needed interpreters. Some of them didn't have relatives to go to. Some arrangements had to be made for them, like the HIAS, or the Catholic Welfare would take care of some people who came here that didn't have relatives to meet them.

Then there were some who were medically not kosher completely. So they had to be detained. Certain papers were made out that they are not being admitted. They're not being refused admission, but wait for further inspection and so on. But this was not, basically not too much of it. But my main work for the immigration office was not as an immigrant inspector but as an investigator and later as a section assistant chief.

LEVINE: Well, now, what did you, how long was it from the time you became an inspector that you became . . .

AUERBACH: An investigator, that's what my next highest grade? I'll tell you, frankly, I don't remember exactly. I know that in 1940 when the war broke out, I was already an investigator. I think it was in 1938 or '39. Now, the job of an investigator was something altogether different. Oh, I'm sorry, I beg your pardon. There was another period before an investigator, a hearing officer. A law was passed that anybody who came into the United States illegally after 1927 or before 1927, it's funny, I don't remember the details, could be legalized if they had lived in the United States continuously

since arrival. That's funny, I don't remember whether it was before 1927 or after. It must have been before because the law, I think, was passed in 1927. That if you had no criminal records, was never a charity, had no diseases and so on, that he could be admitted and given a green card, made a permanent resident. So we had people applying, people who were illegal here who felt that they meet the regulations for being admitted as legalized, they would come and file an application. Many of them came with lawyers. We, the immigrant inspectors, the investigators, I'm sorry . . .

LEVINE: Now, you were talking about the hearing officer. Uh-huh.

AUERBACH: The hearing officers, the hearing officers were, we had our own private little room, the same as I had when I went to Warsaw. And they would be getting an appointment for a certain date to appear, bring whatever documents they have to show what they have been doing. As soon as they came to the United States they had been getting clearances, certificates to show they were not arrested, medical certificates, that they are able to support themselves. And then

we would have to write up a report saying that we recommend that they be admitted to this country legalized or not legalized. I would say that about ninety-five percent would be legalized. But they also had sometimes investigators who would either any, if there was any kind of suspicion, any kind of doubt about it, they would go and check. The men had to give all the places where they lived and worked since then. They would go and check, what kind of a guy was he? Did he, was he honest? Did he cheat? Was he friendly? Did he ever speak anything against the government of the United States. One of the important thing is that the scare at that time was Communism. We had to find out were these people involved with Communist opinions. Were they antagonistic to the American form of government. It was a difficult job. You had to make a decision, a decision based on facts and also in intuition. Obviously, anybody who was so involved could be denying it.

LEVINE: Did you have to go out and investigate the jobs and the places where the person lived?

AUERBACH: No, not this. When I was a hearing officer, there

would be reports made by the investigators. But I was also an investigator for a certain period. Look, I was there thirty-six years. That's a long time. I did a lot of work. But in the end, for the last, oh, at least the last fifteen, twelve to fifteen years, I was an assistant section chief.

LEVINE: Well, why don't you tell about being an investigator. What was involved in that?

AUERBACH: What was involved in investigator is what I mentioned before. That somebody applied for legalization, is illegally in the United States. He gave a list of places where he worked. He may even be married, or he may have friends that he mentioned, that he has certain qualifications. He knows certain languages, for instance, that may be useful to the United States. We would go out to the places where he lived, to the places where he worked, and find out what kind of a guy he was, and check up on that, especially if somebody, you'd be surprised how many people came out and said bad things about them when they, everybody developed a certain jealousy, whatever the case may be. And sometimes they would, they would have to give things in their applications,

like, "Have you ever been arrested?" They would say, "No." We would find out, go to the place of residency, "This guy, why, he did this and that." And so on and so forth. That's, it was a rough job.

LEVINE: What, just roughly, off the top of your head, do you have any sense of the percentage of people that you investigated that were deported?

AUERBACH: Well, I wouldn't say deported. I would say refused a green card. That does not necessarily mean they were deported. They were given a chance to, probably to remain here for a certain length of time. I don't recall exactly the way it was. But the percentage, I would say, would probably be no more than five percent. There were certain situations where I really helped people. I remember the case you mentioned in Italian. You brought it up to me. I'm glad you mentioned that. One very young Italian fellow, he must have been around twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, came in illegally. He was a seaman. He jumped ship. He worked on a ship that came in. They get landing privileges, and they remained here. A good many illegal aliens were ship jumpers, because that's the easiest way to get here. Anyway, he was

caught. I don't remember how. And he was investigated, and he was supposed to be deported because he didn't have anything down there. I really felt sorry. He was a real sweet kid, and there was nothing I could do except recommend, find out that he is not legally in the country and should not, I couldn't, there was nothing there that would allow him to get a green card. I told him, I says, "Why don't you go and enlist in the army, in the American Army? You will serve a time, and that will take away the problem of your having come in illegally here." I want to tell you, I still have a letter that he wrote me after he went to the army, and after he came out of the army, and after he was made a legal resident. I mean, you did things like that. After all, who was harmed by it, nobody. You have occasions when they find a man with a family, a wife and children. He's illegal in the country. So you helped him as much as you could, and so on, without bending the law. You told him what you could do within the law to benefit from it. If you had to recommend deportation you had to, you did it, sometimes with a broken heart. It was a good job. I had good comrades and I was treated well by my

superiors. They thought well of me because I received regular promotions. Each time was a promotion. From an inspector, a ship inspector to a hearing officer, no, to an investigator, to a hearing officer, than to an assistant chief. That's the highest I achieved.

LEVINE: What were your duties as an assistant chief?

AUERBACH: What did I do? Well, I had a number of men under me.

I didn't go out in the field. I had to review the reports they made. The investigators had to submit reports. Incidentally, I turned out to be a very good writer, they told me. That's the reason why I made an assistant chief. One of the big chiefs, the real big ones, when I was still an investigator, we had to write a report. Joe Schmoe, he lives at this and this place, and you did this and that, and this is what this one said and that one said, and what our impression is and so on and so forth. Anyway, when they changed the title of, instead of investigator they called them something like the, uh, the secret service, secret service agent. There was some other name, something akin to agent. They upgraded the whole thing. I forgot the title. It's funny, my

memories are kind of poor on certain, on certain things. Anyway, we were required to write reports of the investigation. This man came in. He wanted to copy the FBI in everything. He had been connected with it. And he was the assistant district director. It was a very big job, for the whole district.

LEVINE: Do you remember his name, the name of that person?

AUERBACH: I would rather not mention. I would rather not mention.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

AUERBACH: I remember his name because he was with me a number of years. But he wanted to copy, the reports should be, according to him, businesslike. That anybody who goes to Washington, you know, Washington sometimes reviewed these reports, too, the main office. One day I, I worked as an investigator. I had to make my reports. I was, we had three or four assistant sections, with assistant chiefs because there was a different type of work. Some were handling only seamen, some were handling only suspicions of anarchists, things of that sort. This guy had a voice like a bulldozer. He had a corner office in

the building. All of a sudden everybody hears him yell, "Hey, Zeke!" Zeke was my supervisor, called Zekerman, called him Zeke for short. "Is Auerbach there? Come in with him right away to my office." Everybody heard it and started looking at me. What did Auerbach do? You are going to get it now, kid. And he was a disciplinarian. We came into the office. He says, "Are you Auerbach?" "Yes." "Did you write this?" He shows me a report, a typed report. We had girls who typed the reports. I said, "Yes, I wrote it. What's wrong with it?" "What's wrong with it? It warmed the cockles of my heart." (he laughs) I'll never forget it. "Eke, take him off the outside work. I want him to review the reports of the other investigators." That's how I became an assistant to him. And, I tell you, it was one of the worst things that I ever, the worst chore I ever did in my life. Most of the others, I must say, it's not, almost unbelievable, but there were very few of them who would write, write a good English. I was the foreigner. And, I must say, my writing is good. You know, you have seen some of my writing.

LEVINE: It's very good, yeah.

AUERBACH: And writing a report, there was nothing to it. You still have to phrase, but you put it in good, simple English without fancy language, without embellishments, without saying things that are not there, without imagining things. Everything had to be to the point. They couldn't do it. They couldn't do it. Not they, I mean, some of them. So I worked for quite a while reviewing, but I hated it.

LEVINE: Did you edit? Did you have to edit the reports?

AUERBACH: That's exactly the point. When I edited it, then they hated me for editing it. They knew I had to do it, I couldn't help it. And I would tell them, quietly, sometimes. It wouldn't go to the, I wouldn't go to the chief. I would go directly to them. I mean, I didn't have to do it. I would say, "Look, why don't you change it? It looks better, it sounds better." And so on and so forth. But it means it had to go to the girl, the girl had to re-type the whole report sometimes because the wording had to be changed, et cetera. It was unpleasant. So the time came, I started with that, and finished my

thirty-six years and got out.

LEVINE: What were the high points of your government service at Ellis Island?

AUERBACH: The high point, I must say that when I arrayed myself in a fancy uniform. Bear in mind one thing, before I continue with this, that in Europe, look, I was a kid, I was in Europe. I saw the police down there. I, how they treated the people. You were nobody. The cop on the beat could slap you in the face for no reason at all, for nothing. I saw how the Germans treated us. And then I saw how the people, the human, they treat us here. And, by the way, they were all in uniform down there. To me somebody in uniform is somebody who was very important, for good or for bad, but he is important. And I should be in uniform, wearing a uniform, and be respected? And everybody who saw me in uniform, I usually didn't travel home in uniform. I changed it in the office. But sometimes I would go there. And look at with so much respect, and getting a good salary, and having a very pleasant job. What else could a poor immigrant want?

LEVINE: Did you socialize with the other people you worked with?

AUERBACH: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, of course. We had friends. We worked together. We would visit each other occasionally, those who lived close by.

LEVINE: Were there many people who worked on the immigration staff who lived in New Jersey as well as in New York, do you recall?

AUERBACH: That I couldn't tell you. I couldn't tell you. I know one lived on Long Island in a town not far from Long Beach. Merrick, I think it was. The reason I know, that it was before I bought, I had a house in Long Beach, before I moved to Long Beach I lived in the Bronx, and that's where I moved. He had a car, he would drive me, drive me home. But it's only a short distance away. So we had that. Others, I don't remember.

LEVINE: Was there a large medical staff on the island when you worked there?

AUERBACH: Oh, yes. They had a hospital down there. I don't know how large it was. I'm not, we had nothing to do

with it. You know, the island is like a, like a horseshoe, like a horseshoe.

LEVINE: Island One, Island Two, Island Three.

AUERBACH: Right. Like it is in the, like a capital E. And we were on one side of it. We had nothing to do with the other side. The arrangements for sleeping and the food and so on. Of course, we had a restaurant where we got food. We ate it there.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Would you bring your lunch, or you would be served food as part of your job, or . . .

AUERBACH: Would you believe me, I don't remember. You know, it's funny. I have an idea we ate there.

LEVINE: You had served lunch.

AUERBACH: No, I think they had a kitchen that we, oh, yes, I'm pretty sure now. Because they had a kitchen for the, for the detainees. Oh, yes, I remember, sure, we ate there.

LEVINE: I see. So you would just sit with staff members and

eat in the same dining room.

AUERBACH: We didn't eat in the same place where the detainees were. We had a separate restaurant. I'm pretty sure, but if anybody who listens to this knows better, I apologize. I'm pretty sure we ate there. All in all it was a very interesting job. In traveling as an investigator, that was, I think, the most difficult job, to me, and to many others. You had an address, a number where the person lived. You had places where he lived before. You came in, and you didn't go in uniform, you know. You wore (?). You went to all locations in the city. Different time you would go in once or twice. The people were not home. You had to go again, come at night. And they looked with suspicion. "You are a government officer? You don't look like a government officer. You have a badge? So what." And some of them wouldn't want to talk. "You are asking about Joe? Joe? Joe who? Oh, Joe Birchenstein. Yeah, yeah, he used to live, but I didn't know him, I didn't want." They didn't want to get involved, and that was a very difficult part. But still more difficult, but this was a pleasant, this was something when somebody

made an application, he himself gave you the addresses, he himself gave you the places where he worked. He himself told you what he, what he did, his education, and so on and so forth. Those were very, relatively pleasant. But another part of the investigator was when we had a complaint or a suspicion that there were people illegally in the country. Somebody write in a letter that, "This guy, John Huckleberry who lives at this and this address doesn't have a green card. He smuggled in on a ship. He was a sailor." Now we had to go, then we came usually two, with the power of, we had the power of arrest. And we would come and try to find out, ask neighbors, ask people. Most of these letters were anonymous. People didn't want to get involved. But find out the place of employment where he worked and so on, anything, without letting on. You had to say you're an immigration officer, naturally. Otherwise people wouldn't talk to us. But without letting him know, in any way, he was being investigated. But most of the time it would even turn out to be a boon to him because the people were here, first of all a person who was here so many years was entitled to become legalized. They may not even have known about

it. And those others had a wife and children, they surely were entitled to be legalized. They had to go through a certain procedure. So in many cases we really did him a favor. But the worst situation was where we had to deport him, like a seaman who jumped ship. Only we caught him, it was only six months. There were no ceremonies made with him. Off he went. And unless, unless he can show that he would be subject to persecution in his own country for whatever reason. If he was political escapee or something of that sort. There you had to use a lot of German, a lot of tact, a lot of know-how. And it was, at times, even dangerous. You had to go . . .

LEVINE: What's the danger? You mean, that they would physically . . .

AUERBACH: No, but you go to certain places, people were there just at night, and they already knew that you were an immigration officer looking after this guy. There had been very, very few cases where there were, people were insulted. "What are you bothering him for? He's a nice guy. Go ahead, do whatever you want. Leave him alone." You had to explain to them, you cannot, these people, you cannot explain. You

said, "That's part of the job. I mean, that's something, the government wants it. You're an American citizen, you've got to obey the government."

That was the unpleasant. The pleasantest parts were those on the island.

LEVINE: Were you given special training in, uh . . .

AUERBACH: Not really, not really. We had to know the law, of course. If we did have, before starting work there was, I think we went to Washington on a training course, a school, for about a week or something. It wasn't much. They had, they had a, when they were recruiting other people.

LEVINE: But you learned on the job, and you had taken a test to get the job.

AUERBACH: Right.

LEVINE: So that was, uh-huh. Yeah.

AUERBACH: The training course, I think, was after you already were appointed as an immigration officer. I'll tell you, it's many years ago. 1930 is a long time. '30 to 1992. Oh, boy.

LEVINE: Sixty-two is very long.

AUERBACH: Sixty-two years. Goodness gracious. I'm surprised I remember that much.

LEVINE: Was there anything that made you proud? I know you were proud to wear the uniform and have such a humane, uh . . .

AUERBACH: I was proud to have come to the United States as a penniless immigrant at the age of eighteen and to be given the opportunity to study enough and to work myself up enough, and to become eligible for one of the really fine jobs in the government. You couldn't think of it in Europe, no place in Europe, unless you wanted to become a stool pigeon or something, then they would take you, to spy on somebody else. But to become an honorable job in the police, let's say, force, no how, no place. Only in the country of America could you do that. Of course, I don't know some other democracies, but I doubt if you can do it in England. The British are very conscious of their, uh, being British, I doubt it, I don't know. I'm just saying.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, is there anything else that you would

like to say before we close?

AUERBACH: Well, the only thing I can say is this, something that I already repeated a couple of times. I feel forever grateful and, for being fortunate enough to have come to this country, to have brought my parents here, to have brought my brothers and sisters here, and to have saved them from the Holocaust, because they, because most of my other relatives, most, all of them, not most. All of them, with the exception of one survivor who is in Canada, were exterminated, they were gassed at Auschwitz. So I can only have a sense of gratitude and nothing, nothing more. This, incidentally, the cousin of mine who was saved lives in Canada. He has appeared in dozen of places to lecture about his personal experience. He was in the, he was among the sixteen hundred people, not sixteen, I forgot how many, but nine hundred or six hundred or eight hundred, no wait a minute. There were about sixteen hundred Jews who were driven out of the town like dogs, like sheep. Abused on the way. And finally, I don't even want to talk about it, finally gassed at Auschwitz. He was the only survivor of the whole family. There were some

survivors from the town. There were a few. There were about four or five that I know of. There may be others in the different countries. We know four or five in the United States.

LEVINE: Well, you have so many layers to your story and it's so rich I appreciate very much you telling it.

AUERBACH: I would also like to say I think that my book, I mean, I am plugging my own book. I wrote it quite some time ago. It gives a wonderful description of life in that shtetl, in that little town, how the people lived, how they, what they learned, how they worked, how they made a living, how the youngsters paired off, how a wedding was celebrated, how the synagogue was, service in the synagogue was conducted, how the holidays were celebrated, how there was, that's all the things that we had. What we didn't have, that we had no medication, how crude everything was, how uncertain life was. It's a wonderful book, really. People can learn a lot about it.

LEVINE: Well, okay. Well, I want to thank you very, very much.

AUERBACH: Well, I'm pleased, I'm glad to be put in a position of not being forgotten. Somebody will read what I said, or listen to it, and that makes me feel very good.

LEVINE: Okay. Thank you very much. I've been talking with . . .

AUERBACH: Well, the pleasure was mine.

LEVINE: This is, I've been with Jacob Auerbach, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off.