

EI-257

ESTHER EHRLICH SILVERMAN

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- **POLAND: STLOSKY (LEMBERG)**
- **US: NEW YORK, NY; CLIFTON, NJ**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today with Esther

SILVERMAN: Silver---

LEVINE: Silverman, who came from Poland to the United States through Ellis Island in 1921 when she was seven.

SILVERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: And today is March 1, 1993, and we're here in Clifton, New Jersey, at Mrs. Silverman's home. Okay. Well, I'm very happy to be here.

SILVERMAN: Thank you very much.

LEVINE: And I'm looking forward to hearing what you can remember. I know you were young, but what do you remember about Poland? Why don't we start by you saying your birth date and the town you were born in?

SILVERMAN: Yes. The, I was born [break in tape]

LEVINE: Okay, the town you were born in.

SILVERMAN: Uh, Stlosky. S-T, S-T-L-O-S-K-Y, Stlosky, yeah. And it was six miles away from the big city of Lemberg. Everybody knows Lemberg. That was six miles away from it.

LEVINE: Is that L-E-M ---?

SILVERMAN: L-E-M-B-E-R-G, Lemberg.

LEVINE: Okay. So you were there for your first seven years.

SILVERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: What do you remember about that town?

SILVERMAN: I remember we had a farm, we had a cow, and that's a ba--. Another thing is, we had a very nice home and the home -- the whole village -- burned down. And our house was with it -- burned down completely.

LEVINE: Do you know why, or what caused it, or?

SILVERMAN: No, I wouldn't know. But, see, the roofs from these houses were made

out of straw. And any little thing caught on, especially in the summertime. It was so dry that they caught fire. I don't know. But I remember the fire. That's all I remember about that town.

LEVINE: Well, now, did that happen right before you left?

SILVERMAN: Oh, about two years before. About two years, 'cause -- maybe less. Because we had to live -- we lived by my mother's cousin. Her husband was here in America, too. And she had one daughter, and the daughter died. She was all alone, so we moved in with her. So we stayed there, I don't remember how long we stayed there. That I couldn't remember. Maybe a year, two years, I don't know. That was like in a dream, I remember it.

LEVINE: Yeah. Why don't you say your birth date?

SILVERMAN: 10/10. The tenth month, the tenth day.

LEVINE: 1910? 10/10/10?

SILVERMAN: I don't, I don't remember what birth I gave in. Because I was -- according to them -- I was ten years old. So it must have been ten, 10/10/10. It must have been then. That's the birth we gave in. (?)

LEVINE: Okay. Now, did you, what was your mother's name and her maiden name?

SILVERMAN: Eh, her name was Huber, H-U-B-E-R, *khaver*, Eva. In English, Eva H-U-B-E-R. Of course, my younger daughter's named after her. Eva. (laughs)

LEVINE: And your father's name?

SILVERMAN: Max, *Mendel*. Max.

LEVINE: Your maiden name is Mendel?

SILVERMAN: His name, my father's name, his name was Mendel Ehrlich, E-H-R-L-I-C-H. That was his name.

LEVINE: And, uh, did you have brothers and sisters?

SILVERMAN: One older brother.

LEVINE: And his name?

SILVERMAN: Hymie. *Chayam*, Hymie.

LEVINE: And now, what -- what did people do for work in that town? What kind?

SILVERMAN: We all had farms. There was no other work but farming.

LEVINE: And your father, did he have -- farms?

SILVERMAN: My father was, I don't remember. He must have been on a farm, too. Because I don't even know what he did, because I don't remember. My mother was pregnant with me when I was bor--. She didn't even know she was pregnant when my father came to America.

LEVINE: Oh, so you didn't know your father till you came.

SILVERMAN: I didn't know, till I came to America.

LEVINE: I see.

SILVERMAN: In fact, they tell me, "Call. There's your father, call him." I says, "I'm ashamed." I didn't want to call him. That I remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember -- what did your mother do? How did she get along when your father was here?

SILVERMAN: I'm telling you, the farm. We had a farm.

LEVINE: You just --

SILVERMAN: We lived from the farm. We had everything on the farm. In case she needed some help, she used to hire some help. They used to help her on the farm. People weren't so bad off. That's why she wanted to go back. We weren't bad off. We had a cow; we had all the milk we wanted. She would make her own cheese, her own -- all these things. And everything we had from the farm.

LEVINE: Do you remember any dishes that she prepared that you?

SILVERMAN: Who knows? That -- that I wouldn't remember, no. Same thing like here, I guess. Chickens, she'd make chicks -- we had a *shokhet* [ritual slaughterer], used to come kill the chickens. We weren't so bad off in Europe like some people. They haven't got what to eat; we had plenty. And we had very nice Gentile neighbors. They were wonderful. They were really good to us. My mother used to hire them -- pay them, and that's what they wanted. You know. We weren't so bad off. She didn't want to stay here. No way. She only wanted to go back.

LEVINE: Was the town about equal, Jewish and Gentiles?

SILVERMAN: No. They only had about ten Jewish families living there. Oh, no, no way. Only about ten.

LEVINE: But everybody got along.

SILVERMAN: Oh, yes. There was no one could say -- I don't know what it was in their hearts. But outside -- no way, no way.

LEVINE: Now, did you, were you religious? Did you practice?--

SILVERMAN: (whispers) Yes, oh, yes. In Europe? Oh, yes. Everybody practiced religious -- religion, sure. Kosher and everything, oh, yes.

LEVINE: And how about grandparents? Did you have any?

SILVERMAN: No. With me I -- did I have? My father's parents, my father's mother, yes. My fa-- my father's mother was alive, yes. I had a grandmother.

LEVINE: Do you remember her?

SILVERMAN: No.

LEVINE: Not too much.

SILVERMAN: No. I was -- she was in a different town, and we didn't, I really don't. I don't know. I don't think so. I don't remember.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember the house you lived in? Can you, besides

having a straw roof; is there anything else that you? --

SILVERMAN: I got two-family. It was a two-room house. And then we had, like, in the fo-- in the hall that you went in, was like a big pi-- I don't know what you call it, we used to call it a *pripichik* [hearth]. They had the song '*pripichik*'. And there there was a big stove. My mother used to bake there and cook there. It was very -- two big rooms -- bigger than this thing, tremendous. We had a nice house there, but it burned down. So we had to live by somebody that was -- it was a nice house, but it wasn't as nice as ours.

LEVINE: Well, now, was the house, what was the house itself made out of?

SILVERMAN: Not, I don't think, it wasn't brick. It was like, uh, something like this, you know.

LEVINE: Like wood?

SILVERMAN: No, no, no. No wood. Inside, like cement. Who knows? It must have been cement. And as you went out, we had steps, big steps going up. It was nice. I remember the house, I remember. And across -- then right across we had a stall for the cow, you know, and then they had a big yard there with beautiful trees. Beautiful trees, we had all kinds of trees there. Apple trees, pear trees. It was really nice, like a country place here. It was just like a country place.

LEVINE: Do you remember as a child what you did for fun? Did you?

SILVERMAN: Who knows? I played with the *goy*-- *goyishe* children, Christian children. Who knows what, we had played like everybody else plays. Yeah. We -- sure -- we had a neighbor right, uh, few -- it was just, a

little distance away. A neighbor, *goyishe* neighbor. We -- Saturday, they used to light the stove for us. You know. We didn't have, I'm telling you -- we had it quite good there.

LEVINE: Huh. Now, how about, do you remember any experiences with your mother or father, like, when you were there?

SILVERMAN: Not with my father. I think my father, I'd see in America.

LEVINE: Not your father, but your mother.

SILVERMAN: No. Just like mother and children with mothers, I guess.

LEVINE: Did you, can you remember any ideas your mother had, things that she wanted you to live?--

SILVERMAN: No.

LEVINE: -- the way she wanted you to be?

SILVERMAN: No, no, no. No, no, we were too young then to be -- be-- to be told what to do. We knew we had to be good, that's all. But we weren't told to be good. We knew we had to be good.

LEVINE: Now, how was it decided that you would leave when you did?

SILVERMAN: My father wanted us here. My father bought a house here, a four-family house in Brooklyn. And he wanted us to come, so we came. He sent papers and everything. In fact, my father became a citizen here. We were in Europe, but we were citizens on my father's papers, sure.

LEVINE: Okay. So he sent the money, and --

SILVERMAN: Oh, everything.

LEVINE: And the tickets, and?

SILVERMAN: Oh, everything. Because my mother didn't want to sell anything, because she figured she could come back, she might come back. She didn't want to sell it. She left everything to her brother, the one that came from America to Europe. She -- she -- she left everything to him; he should be able to stay at somebody's house. He was staying in his - - in a cousin's house with the idea that the farm will be taken care of by them. And they would take whatever was on the farm. They would take it. And that's how they took care of my mother's brother -- an older brother, yeah.

LEVINE: So do you remember leaving for the trip to America?

SILVERMAN: I guess so. I don't know. I remember one thing. As we were riding, that's what I remember. So my mother's brother was walking, and he was crying so that we were leaving. He was walk-- we were going one way and he was going the opposite way. And when he saw her leave, he cried so terrible because he didn't have anybody else there but us.

LEVINE: Do you remember if you knew anything about America before you got here?

SILVERMAN: Nothing.

LEVINE: Nothing.

SILVERMAN: Nothing.

LEVINE: So do you remember anything your mother packed and took with you?

SILVERMAN: All our clothes. Only the clothes, nothing else. Yeah, because she made us new clothes.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the clothes?

SILVERMAN: Oh, they were terrible. I wouldn't want to wear them now. But at that time they were nice, yeah. Sure, she-- a dressmaker made them for us. You couldn't buy ready-made clothes there. So a dressmaker made the clothes for us and, uh, that's what we took along. Yeah.

LEVINE: And then you traveled -- what, by train?

SILVERMAN: We traveled by train. My mother was -- we were supposed to go to Paris, through Paris, but she made a mistake. She bought the wrong tickets. So we went to Rotterdam, Holland. And that's where we -- so we had to wait three weeks. Of course, the mistake that we -- my mother made, we had to wait three weeks extra to get on the boat. And the name of the boat, I remember, was Rijndam. That's right. That I remember. And it took us two weeks on the boat to get here.

LEVINE: Did you have to be examined in Rotterdam?

SILVERMAN: No, not in Rott--. Here in Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Do you remember, in Amsterdam, do you remember anything about it? Because that was like your first time out of your town.

SILVERMAN: I remember sleeping, I don't think, it must have been a hotel. There was a two-layers -- beds on the bottom, beds on the top. And we were -- that's all I remember is the beds, nothing else. Like this, I wouldn't even remember no. No.

LEVINE: Do you remember your mother, I mean, was she -- was she frightened, was she scared of coming, or?

SILVERMAN: No, no. She wasn't scared.

LEVINE: No.

SILVERMAN: She was like me. You have to go, you go. If you don't like it, you leave, and you go back.

LEVINE: That was her attitude.

SILVERMAN: Sure. That's the way I am. If I don't like something, I just pack my things and go, go back home.

LEVINE: Okay. So now you got on the boat. What was the boat like?

SILVERMAN: It was terrible. I was so sick. I was so sick -- seasick, terrible. (laughs) I couldn't eat anything. Oy, that was the worst part I ever had -- worst.

LEVINE: Do you remember your accommodations on the boat, what they were?

SILVERMAN: No, that I wouldn't remember. I know I was sick, that's all I know.

LEVINE: So is, there's nothing that stands out about the voyage except the

seasickness.

SILVERMAN: No. I know that the -- the people that worked on it were very nice to us. Very, oh, very nice. And whatever we wanted, they gave us. They were very nice. Yeah.

LEVINE: And do you remember the boat coming into the New York Harbor?

SILVERMAN: That --that -- I'm telling you, that's the boat, Rotterdam [sic].

LEVINE: Yeah. When it came into the New York Harbor, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

SILVERMAN: That was the same boat, the big boat I think, came in. That was just the name of the boat. Rotterdam was the town in Holland.

LEVINE: The Rijndam?

SILVERMAN: What is it? What?

LEVINE: The Rijndam? R-A-N-D-O-M [sic]? That's the name of the boat you came in on.

SILVERMAN: The boat, yeah, I think so, yeah. That was the only boat I was on.

LEVINE: Yeah. And then you, okay. So what do you remember of Ellis Island?

SILVERMAN: I remember one thing. They examined us. That's what I remember. And, boy, did they give us an examination, from head --

LEVINE: From head to tail.

SILVERMAN: From head to toe, every part of our body was examined. Eyes, ears, head -- to see if we had any lice in our head. A lot of people had lice in their heads. They wouldn't let them in. Had to go take care of -- and in a certain kind of a bath. I don't know what it was. But it just, but, no, we're thank-- we didn't have no trouble. The only thing I remember -- when I was on the boat, my father was on a little boat and he threw up - - what'd he throw, bananas? And then we got so sick of bananas; we didn't want to look at bananas. So that I remember. And then the people told me, "Call your father." I says, "I'm ashamed to call my father." I never saw him. It was the first time I saw him, when I was on the boat the first time. I was ashamed to call him.

LEVINE: What did, what was it like being with him for the first time?

SILVERMAN: No. It was nice. He took, I remember he took me on his lap and he kissed me. He never saw me before, you know. I was his baby. Yeah. Yeah, it wasn't bad. But the only thing is -- when we came here, my father had the house and furniture for us but he -- the apartment was rented. And you couldn't put out a tenant unless we came -- we were in the city, we were here. If we were here, he was able to put the tenant out. So we had to wait two weeks, stayed in my cousin's house. She had seven children in four rooms, and we were four people extra. Eleven people in those -- in four rooms. Oy it was a place. It was terrible. Nowhere to sleep, even! But we had to stay there. We couldn't rent anything, but we only stayed there two weeks. So, but later on we fixed up a beautiful home. My father's cousins, they divorced. So he bought everything from her. Furniture, dishes, linens, everything. Curtains, whatever you want. So we had, so when we, after the two weeks we fixed up a gorgeous, my mother was a *berye* [competent housewife]. She fixed up that home you'd think she lived

here all her years.

LEVINE: So was the home, how did, did the home here compare with the one you left?

SILVERMAN: Well, we had more room here. And then, then in Europe we had no steam, no stove. But here, we didn't have no steam here either, but we had a coal stove. But the only thing is, people used to say, "Ooh, you have no steam, it's terrible." So she says, "What's so terrible? In Europe you have to go looking for wood. Here you don't have to look for wood. Here you go down the basement, the coal is there." You know, so she was satisfied. She was really well satisfied. The only thing is, she didn't like America, that's all.

LEVINE: What did she have against it?

SILVERMAN: She just didn't like it. I don't know. She just didn't like it.

LEVINE: And your father?

SILVERMAN: Well, my father liked it. My father was here before. We liked it. We loved it here. He didn't want; if we would have wanted to go home (I call Europe home) my mother would have gone. But we didn't want to go, she wouldn't leave us here. So she -- that's why she stayed with us.

LEVINE: I see. So do you remember going to school?

SILVERMAN: Oh, yes. In fact, they put me in, in the 1-A. You see, in Europe I went to school. In by us in Poland, we were compelled to go to school. The gentile people used to send the children to work on the farm. They

didn't send them to school. So the Jewish people sent their children to school. I knew how to read and write, everything here. I didn't know what I was writing, what I was reading in American language. But I knew, in fact they put me in the 1-A -- they took me right away out. They put me in the higher class. Because I knew how to read and arithmetic is all over the same. But in Polish it's almost like English. And I knew how to read perfect! I didn't know what I was reading, but I knew how to read. So they right away they said, "She doesn't belong here." But do you know in a year I got skipped? I didn't want to speak no other language but American. I wouldn't go with *grine* [greenhorn] children. I only wanted to go with American girls. And I learned that language so fast. People don't believe that I was -- that I'm a foreigner. Have I --I haven't got no accent, have I?

LEVINE: No.

SILVERMAN: Because I -- I just wanted to be an American.

LEVINE: Huh. How did you learn it so fast, do you think?

SILVERMAN: I just, I don't know. I loved it, that's all. And I had friends, American girls. See?

LEVINE: So were there any things about this country that were different that you liked?

SILVERMAN: I liked everything here.

LEVINE: Oh, you did.

SILVERMAN: I personally liked everything here. I was satisfied. Later on my mother

liked it too, after a while.

LEVINE: She did?

SILVERMAN: Oh yeah, after a while she did. But me, I used to love it here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about your brother?

SILVERMAN: He was, uh, he also -- he was al-- he was very good in school, too. He was very good in school. Until -- his arithmetic was perfect, he is --

LEVINE: So how long did you stay in school?

SILVERMAN: Oh, until I was -- I was in high school, Washington Irving High School in Manhattan. I used to travel. I used to, I wanted to take up designing. I used to love to sew things. So, I wanted to take up designing. The only place you can learn is in Manhattan. I used to travel from Brooklyn to Manhattan to go to high school. I used to love it. (sighs) Washington Irving High School, the best thing. But the only thing is, I didn't -- I finished high school and I didn't go ahead. And it's no good. I should have gone to college, so I didn't. I went to work, I went to work.

LEVINE: Did you work with designing or anything?

SILVERMAN: No, I worked in a dress shop. I worked in a dress shop. I, uh, used to, like, uh, I used to have a lot of contractors. And we used to take, ship out -- they used to cut the clothes in the factory, and then ship it out to the contractors they should sew it up. I used to ship out all the dresses, all the things with --- everything. Then when they used to bring it back, I had to count to see if everything -- if they didn't gyp us and keep a couple of dresses, you know. I had to ship, ship in and ship -- and pull

in. So I had a very good job. In fact, when I went into work at that place, a girl before me got ten dollars. At that time, ten dollars was a lot of money. Me they gave twelve dollars. She says, "Why does Esther get twelve dollars and I only got ten dollars?" She says, "Maybe she's worth more." (laughs) That's what it was for --. I remember I used to work at Three Brothers Jacobs. They were in Manhattan.

LEVINE: How long did you work there, like, from what years?

SILVERMAN: Oh, uh, gee, I don't remember the years. But I worked there about three years -- three, four, -- my brother worked there as a --. Through him I got that job. My brother, they learned, my brother was a cutter. Then my mother was very smart. She used to say, "What, is there such a thing better than a cutter?" So they said, "Yes. He can be a pattern-maker." So he worked four weeks for nothing for the boss, and he became a pattern maker. That's a -- that's a good job. A pattern maker is a --. Till this day he quit being a pattern maker. Very good. He used to make very nice money. And I used to ship dresses in and out.

LEVINE: So you were living in Brooklyn then?

SILVERMAN: Oh, yes. All my years. All my years I lived in Brooklyn. Just when I came here -- I don't like Jersey. I don't like Jersey. (laughs) There at least we have buses, we have everything. Here you got nothing.

LEVINE: Well, tell me when you met your husband?

SILVERMAN: Oh, this, no, no. I used to go with another fellow, back in high school yet. But I found out that he wasn't legally here. He was Canadian, but he wasn't legally here. So I found out. So I didn't want to go with him any more. I was too young; I was seventeen -- not even seventeen. So

I met my husband. I've had a very good-looking husband.

LEVINE: Yeah?

SILVERMAN: You want to see his picture?

LEVINE: When we're finished with the tape. Tell me ---

SILVERMAN: He was a butcher. My husband is a butcher. I got, I went to a dance -- a dance in the Kings Highway. There's a temple there. So we went to a dance, that was near me. I used to live near there, and I met him there. So he was so good looking. A good man. He was a butcher.

LEVINE: What was his name?

SILVERMAN: Ely.

LEVINE: Ely. And, uh, and your children, do you have children?

SILVERMAN: I have three children, a son and two daughters.

LEVINE: What are their names?

SILVERMAN: Harvey's, my son, he's the oldest, and I have Barbara that lives here in Jersey, and Evalyn that lives in Buffalo.

LEVINE: And what's Evalyn's married name? Is she married?

SILVERMAN: Ruben. Yes, they're all married. Ruben.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, we're getting close to dinnertime, but why don't you -- what

influence do you think, having been born in Poland and living there for a period of time and coming here and?

SILVERMAN: It's nice to live in a different country -- it's lived--. I tried; do you know I was seventeen times in Israel? I, we traveled. My -- my grandchildren's bar mitzvah present -- it was us to take 'em to Israel. And they were twice already in -- once we took the whole bunch. We had our own bus, everything, and we took them to Israel. And I traveled all through Europe. The only countries I didn't want to go back was the Hitler countries and the communist countries. I guess I was all over. You know, we were -- I was in Switzerland, I didn't take along a coat. Were you ever in Switzerland?

SILVERMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Did you go up that mountain there? And did you see that car that was made out of ice in the mountains there? Yeah, well, I went inside, and it was very cold. So I didn't, and I didn't take along a sweater. Next year I went again to see, just, so I took along a sweater just to go up to the mountains. And then we were in another country. I don't remember what country it was. In fact, I told my son about it. That man, we shouldn't know from it, lost a son. In his memory, he built a square block for little miniatures of everything. Cars, trains, lights. It was something to see. You have never in your life seen something so beautiful. I came home, I says, "Harvey, do you know what I saw?" Something -- I forgot already what country it was. He went to see this. He said, "Ma, it was really, it's unbelievable to see." So I was twice in Europe. More than twice, what am I talking about? Every time I took my grandchildren to Israel, I went through Europe.

LEVINE: I see. But you had no desire to go back?

SILVERMAN: No, I didn't want to go back, no. I thou-- I was afraid to go back there anyhow. I didn't want to go back there. I was in England and France. I didn't go to Spain. Italy, I liked Italy. Italy was beautiful. Switzerland. We went to the Norwegian countries. Oh, it's gorgeous! We went to look for some kind of animal. They said it was the same animal that crosses the street. We never saw it.

LEVINE: What would you say you're proudest of?

SILVERMAN: Traveling was wonderful, and I have lovely children, God bless them, very nice children. Very nice.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, is there anything else you'd like to say?

SILVERMAN: No, no, everything's wonderful. Thank God everything's wonderful. The only thing, I'm sorry that I lost my husband. That's the only thing. He was a good man, very good man. After living with him for fifty-seven years.

LEVINE: If you can say that after fifty-seven years, it must be true.

SILVERMAN: That's what I miss. If my husband would be alive, I wouldn't be here.
(sighs)

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

SILVERMAN: For what? Thank you, thank you.

LEVINE: And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service.

SILVERMAN: Thank you. It was nice to know you.

LEVINE: And I'll be signing off now.