EI-262
NATHAN HANDLER
BIRTH DATE: DECEMBER 26, 1909
INTERVIEW DATE: 3/12/1993
RUNNING TIME: 43:00
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY
INTERVIEW LOCATION: BAYONNE, NEW JERSEY
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 7/1994
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 10/1994

POLAND, 1917
AGE 7
SHIP NAME NOT RECALLED
PORT OF EMBARCATION: LE HAVRE

RESIDENCES: RADOM
HOBOKEN, NJ

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, March 12, 1993. I'm in Bayonne, New Jersey with Mr. Nathan Handler, who came from Poland, he turned seven on the trip over to America, and they left December of 1916 and arrived in January of 1917. Mr. Handler, good morning. Can we start by you giving me your birth date, please.

HANDLER: Well, according to my mother, who ought to know, it was December 26th, right after Christmas.

SIGRIST: And what was the year?

HANDLER: The year was 1909.

SIGRIST: And where were you born, sir?

HANDLER: In a village called Radom. R-A-D-O-M, Poland. It was a small town just within commuting distance from Warsaw, the capital of Poland. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Can you describe the town for me, what it looked like?

HANDLER: Yeah. This was a like an enclave in town itself. It was a walled community mainly with Jewish people, and there happened to be a stream running through it that came in one end and went out the other end. And during the summer time there had to be some apple trees further up at this area where the stream came in, because when we went through we usually went apple picking before they disappeared under the fence on the other end. And the, I lived there with my mother and father and my grandfather. I don't remember my grandmother, but I do remember my grandfather.

SIGRIST: What was your grandfather's name?

HANDLER: I believe it was Louis. L-O-U-I-S.

SIGRIST: This is your mother's father or your father's father?

HANDLER: My father.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what your grandfather was like as a person? What sticks out in your mind about your grandfather?

HANDLER: Well, I don't know too much about him. You see that photograph up there? He looked something like that. You see pictures of elderly Jewish men with beards wearing a yarmulke, what we call, a head covering. That's just what he was like. I can't tell you too much about him, but I do remember him very well. But my grandmother, I have no recollection of.

SIGRIST: Is there a story or an anecdote of some sort that is about your grandfather?

HANDLER: No. I don't recall any.

SIGRIST: What was he like as a person, his personality?

HANDLER: Well, I can hardly say anything about him, but we left so quick, as a matter of fact, we left very quickly. I'll tell that in a little while, why we left. And I didn't have too much time to get to know him.

SIGRIST: What was your dad's name?

HANDLER: His name was Harry.

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

HANDLER: He was a baker then and he died a baker.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me in words what your father looked like?

HANDLER: Well, he was shorter than I am, stocky, dark brownish-black hair. And very nice looking.

SIGRIST: What was his personality like?

HANDLER: He got along with everybody, no question about it. As a matter of fact, when my future mother saw him walking in the street with another girl, she said to the person, "That's the man I'm going to marry." And she evidently did, because here I am. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about how your father did his baking in Poland?

HANDLER: Well, it was old time baking, not like they have today, the modern day. They had the ovens. What was it, hand built bricks. And that was his trade from the time he was very young. And . . .

SIGRIST: Had his father been a baker?

HANDLER: I don't think so, because he went into that either accidentally or on purpose. I never asked him. But he was a baker ever since I first got to speak to him and know him.

SIGRIST: Was there, did he have his own bakery?

HANDLER: No, no. He worked as a laborer in a bakery, and he learned it very well. Of course, when he came here in 1914 he got a job as a baker. And now he did that for the rest of his life.

SIGRIST: It was a trade he could take anywhere.

HANDLER: A trade he could take any place.

SIGRIST: Do you remember ever visiting your father as a child in Poland at his place of business?

HANDLER: No. That I don't recall. I was too young to go out that way. I never even knew where he worked. But I did know that he was working in a bakery.

SIGRIST: What was your mom's name?

HANDLER: Her name was Lena, but my father always called her Leiah. That was a Hebrew name.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

HANDLER: L-E-I-A-H. Leiah.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

HANDLER: Solov, S-O-L-O-V.

SIGRIST: And let me ask you the same sorts of questions about your mother. Can you describe her in words for me, please?

HANDLER: She was a small woman, much slighter build, nice brown hair. Later it turned black and eventually turned gray. But she was a very, very open-minded woman. She spoke with anybody who would want to talk with her, and you just couldn't stop her. And she used to tell me stories, after we came here, what went on in Poland, the town, the people that she knew, and also about, what I just said about meeting the man she was going to marry. But over here she was the same way, never changed.

SIGRIST: Was she from that town?

HANDLER: Yes. She was in the same town as he was.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about, other than the story you

have relayed to us already, about your parents' courtship and their marriage or anything like that, any other information?

HANDLER: No. I know they married early in January of 19, 1909, early in January. And it was just about a year later that I was born, the end of the year, December 26th.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you any stories about when she was expecting you, or about your birth, anything like that?

HANDLER: Nothing at all. But she did tell me that she had a midwife when I came into being, but as far as she went, she didn't speak too much about it.

SIGRIST: Did you have brothers and sisters?

HANDLER: It is something peculiar. I had two younger brothers. All three of us were born inside of three years. A year-and-a-half after me came my brother Joe, and a year-and-a-half after Joe came Sam. And just the three of us. And after we came here, you wouldn't believe it, they had three girls.

SIGRIST: What were the girls' names?

HANDLER: The girls' names, Gussie was the oldest, born in 1918, the year after we got here. The second one was Bertha, who we call Bunny, and the youngest one is Rose. She died about twelve years ago. The youngest one went first.

SIGRIST: So in Poland your mother had her hands full, then.

HANDLER: Oh, definitely, three youngsters, particularly when we had to leave. One night we all five of us with supper, myself, my two brothers and parents, somebody in the City Hall area came to tell us that the soldiers, this was in the summer of 1914. I was five, the others were three-and-a-half and two. That the soldiers were coming to take him into the army. This was, the war had been declared in August in Europe, in August of 1914. This was just about that time. They came to pull him into the army. It was the Russians who wanted to take him in. And right away the man left, he didn't want to be seen, letting people know that he was here. And he said goodbye very fast, kissed everybody, and went out the back door. We didn't hear from him for about three years. We got a letter from the United States, and enclosed was four tickets, from Warsaw to seaport in Le Havre, I think,

in Belgium, to take a boat, to come to this country. Well, she didn't waste any time. She got us all together, wrapped up whatever she could, and we left. That was the four of us. We traveled, I'd say about a couple of months from Warsaw to a seaport, and I wouldn't tell you how much we really appreciated. You heard stories of the atrocities that the Germans afflicted on the people of the country they inhabited. They took over the entire Europe like the second war they did. But the soldiers that took us under their wings, and sped us on our way on trains, cars, anything that could hold us. I walked, and my brother Joe walked, but the younger one couldn't walk very well, so my mother had to carry him. We finally got to the boat, we had to wait a couple of days, and we finally got on board.

SIGRIST: Good. Well, let's go back to Poland.

HANDLER: Go ahead.

SIGRIST: Before we leave Poland I want you to describe your house for me.

HANDLER: That I don't know too well. It's a little small house. Of course, most of those houses weren't very

big. I don't remember it too well. I do remember one incident there. When I was a young toddler walking around my mother had a pot of hot water on the stove. Being curious, a little tyke, I went over and touched the pot and it fell over, right on me. I still have the scar. Eighty-three years, I got that scar. The hot water was all over me, but fortunately they were able to put something on it that just the scar remains. Then about a year or so later I had an attack of scarlet fever. The scarlet fever in itself is not too serious, but the after effects left me with two punctured eardrums, which later on eventually saved my life, I would think, because I was called to go into the army from 1939 to 1945. I was called four times, and each time the Selective Service said, "Go back." And also I missed two wars in Europe, the first war, I was too young, and the second war I was just over the age, but I'll come to a little later why, I was just over the age to become, to go into the army.

SIGRIST: Just born at the perfect time.

HANDLER: Yes, I would say that.

SIGRIST: Who did the cooking in your household in Poland?

HANDLER: Oh, she did.

SIGRIST: Your mother did.

HANDLER: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me some of the sorts of foods that you ate in Poland at that time?

HANDLER: That I don't remember, but it had to be kosher food, because they were kosher, my mother and father were kosher. As a matter of fact, I am that way today. Living with them for, I was almost thirty-three when I got married, and living with them for thirty-three years I sort of got used to the habits. And today I have a problem eating out, because I can't always find the kosher foods, so I have to eat vegetables or fish.

SIGRIST: So your parents were very religious.

HANDLER: They were. They died that way.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about how they practiced their religion in Poland?

HANDLER: Well, my father, they kept a kosher home. They always

did, right up till the end. And they went to all the holidays. He made it a habit of going to services. He couldn't go to services on Saturday morning, because that's the main, that's the Sabbath, and he went in the evenings when he could, and that wore off on me, because I couldn't go to work, I couldn't go to services either on Saturdays. Because eventually he bought a bakery here, and I became a partner in it, a seven day a week job. And I couldn't go to services either.

SIGRIST: As a child in Poland, do you remember a synagogue in this . . .

HANDLER: No, I don't remember it at all, no. But I do know that they were religious, very much so. And it wore off on me.

SIGRIST: Did you have to go to school when you were in Poland?

HANDLER: No. I don't recall ever going to school there. The peculiar part is when I came here they put me in the kindergarten. At seven they put me in the kindergarten. But after two weeks they took me out and put me in the second or third grade, which I didn't mind. (?) Poland for two years.

SIGRIST: When your father left, he left very abruptly . . .

HANDLER: Yes.

SIGRIST: And came to this country in 1914. Tell me a little bit about how your mother coped for those three years before you all came over here. What did she do for money?

HANDLER: I think she got some money from my father. He sent money. That I know. Of course, he saved for the tickets, but he also sent money to her. And how much or how little she never told me, but we did manage to survive. And when we left, we weren't puny. We were good healthy-looking young people. She was married when she was 190, she was born in 1890, so 1917 when we left, she was seventeen when she was married. My father was two years older. I think he was nineteen.

SIGRIST: What did you do for fun in Poland when you were a kid? What was there for fun?

HANDLER: Very little. A lot of times I used to go swimming in that brook I told you about. Of course they always had to have somebody near us seeing you didn't go out too far. But as far as actual entertainment was

concerned there wasn't anything to do.

SIGRIST: Did you play games?

HANDLER: That I don't remember.

SIGRIST: All right. So your father came in 1914, and he's sending money to your mother. Tell me a little bit about when you and your mother and your brothers started getting ready to come, getting perhaps your papers, that kind of thing.

HANDLER: That, they never talked about that, about the papers. She had to get a visa and so on to get out of Poland. That I don't know how she got, but evidently she did get them, otherwise we couldn't have gone. A brother of my father's came to this country about two years before he left Poland. He wound up in Brooklyn. And when he came, my father came through Ellis Island his brother met him and he said he was a baker and he wanted a job in a bakery, so he went to Hoboken. That's where he got the job. And his brother went back to Brooklyn. He used to work on a trolley system as a conductor. After we got there, I saw him quite frequently.

SIGRIST: So is this uncle of yours instrumental in getting you guys over here?

HANDLER: Oh, definitely. Because he helped my father get all the papers and everything ready because he went through it. He went thorough it also, he knew just what to do. And when my uncle came here his name was Lederhandler, L-E-D-E-R Handler. But when he came through Ellis Island they cut off the first five letters. That's how he became Handler.

SIGRIST: That's interesting.

HANDLER: It is interesting. Of course, a lot of people came through the island, they had their names changed for the craziest reasons you could think of. A man came in, he said he was working as a tailor, he was named Taylor. His name was Gold, gold boy or something, they named him Gold. The names were synonymous with what they were doing, that they got the name.

SIGRIST: When you were in Poland and your father was in America, what did America mean to you?

HANDLER: Nothing.

SIGRIST: What did you know of America?

HANDLER: It didn't mean anything to me. I didn't know anything about it.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about having to leave it?

HANDLER: My father wanted us to come there, my mother wanted to go, we had no choice, so we left.

SIGRIST: Children weren't asked their opinions.

HANDLER: No, they didn't. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember specifically what you took, what kind of luggage, or what you decided to take with you?

HANDLER: You see, there wasn't very much, actually. The kids couldn't carry anything. We were too small to carry anything, but she had one bundle that she carried over her shoulders, and that was it.

SIGRIST: And you took the train to Warsaw?

HANDLER: We took the train to Warsaw. Well, actually it wasn't a train. It was more like a cart or a wagon to Warsaw, and there we got the train. And there, as I said, we were sped along the way by the soldiers. And one thing that took my attention was we met a lot of

trains coming back the other way with the windows shuttered from the war. Wounded, killed, whatever. They didn't let us see those trains. They kept us out of sight when those trains went by.

SIGRIST: Was this a scary thing to be traveling at this time?

HANDLER: Yes. It was during the war. The war started in August in 1917 and we left about, I said, the early part of December. And, of course, there wasn't much doing in Poland at that time, but the war was there. And sometimes the Russians were chased out of the town and the Polish Army took over. And my mother used to tell me that there was a picture on the wall with a picture of the Polish president on one side and the Russian czar on the other. Whoever took the town, that's whose face showed on the picture. They never knew about two-sided picture. That's the way it was.

SIGRIST: Did you ever personally observe any fighting or any kind of . . .

HANDLER: No.

SIGRIST: Anything like that?

HANDLER: Nothing at all.

SIGRIST: How long was the train trip from Warsaw? Where, you said you went to Le Havre?

HANDLER: Le Havre or Brest. I don't recall what town it was. I don't even remember the name of the ship. I'll talk about that a little later. And all trains, and it took about a nice, about close to three weeks. Soldiers fed us because she didn't have too much money to start with, but we didn't starve on the way. And we managed to get through to the boat.

SIGRIST: When you arrived at the port did you have to undergo any kind of examinations before you got on?

HANDLER: I don't recall that. They let us go right on board. And, of course, that was steerage. That was the easiest way to go at that time, and that boat was loaded with steerage. I, actually, when I was at this port at the Ellis Island the first time I asked if I could find out the name of the ship. They said at the army base here on the East Side they have a museum where they kept records of the ships that came into this country. So I called up and asked them, I wrote them. They said they don't go back that far, 1917, but I could write to them in Washington and they would

try to find out. I got a letter from Washington. They can't find any trace of the boat. I said that the name was the S.S. London. That's what I was told. That's what I said. But they couldn't find any ship by that name. So I gave up.

SIGRIST: Well, you obviously came over on one. (he laughs)

HANDLER: I came, I had to come. I couldn't swim.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what steerage was like in the boat?

HANDLER: It was dreary, not much sanitary conditions. A lot of people packed int here coming to America, The Golden Land. And the traveling was rough. And we had one experience coming over. One, it happened during the day. I felt a slip, the ship slowing down and finally stopping. So my mother went up on board the deck. They were allowed to travel through the ship from steerage. They were permitted to do that. And she came down to take me up. And we saw a long, black object in the water. Turned out to be a sub. We were very relieved to see the American flag go up on it. And they came over to inspect the ship, registration and so on, what they were carrying. They said

goodbye. They went back to the ship. Down it went. That was the only thing that happened on that trip. I was very happy to say it was the only thing that happened. Because a lot of those ships later on were bombed and never came in.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick?

HANDLER: No, none of us were sick. It was really unusual, because the bottom of the ship, there wasn't much air in it, and it was hard to breathe, but we managed to get through it. And the last night that we were on board the boat, and they came into New York Harbor. I was still up. My two younger brothers were sleeping. My mother was upstairs. She came down again and took me upstairs, and she pointed. Now, I'll never forget that sight. I saw the Statue of Liberty. Her arm was up, the light was burning. She was still a young lady at that time, in 1917. She was only about maybe forty years old. 1870, at least, was the day they put it up. So she was practically a brand-new lady up there. Oh, I'll never forget that sight.

SIGRIST: What did they do? What happened after?

HANDLER: The ship stayed there overnight, and the next day

lighters, if you know what I mean, the small boats came to take off the people. Some were taken to New York. The upper class passengers didn't have to go through Ellis Island, didn't go there. They were taken right to New York. Those that had to go to the island, we went there. They took us to Ellis Island. We stayed there for a few hours, went through papers and health checks, and we were told to wait in one of those cages that I told you about before. And it may seem unusual, but I recognized somebody coming down towards us. He hadn't changed much since I last saw him. I said, in Yiddish, "There comes the father." And it was. I recognized him immediately. He came to us. He went with the papers, and he took us to Hoboken. That's where he had a room. And as a matter of fact he had, he took an apartment shortly before we arrived. And when we got to Hoboken we went to that apartment. And there we were in the United States.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me your father's meeting with your mother, because obviously they hadn't seen each other.

HANDLER: They hadn't seen each other in almost four years. That I can't remember. We were too much excited

holding on to him, all three of the kids, holding on to him and to my mother. We all embraced. And then, of course, we took the boat back to Hoboken.

SIGRIST: Can you be a little more specific about the kinds of examinations that you all had to undergo?

HANDLER: No, I don't remember, no.

SIGRIST: And I also want to ask you, you turned seven somewhere in the process. When was the, where were you in the immigration process?

HANDLER: On the boat.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories of any kind of, I don't know, celebration?

HANDLER: Nothing at all. She only told me, "You are seven," at that time. As a matter of fact, my youngest brother also had a birthday on a trip after we came in. His is January 15th. So he also celebrated a birthday shortly after we got here.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. So your dad came and met you, and this is January of 1917, and he takes you to Hoboken.

SIGRIST: That's right.

HANDLER: Tell me a little bit about what your impressions of America were, your first impressions of this country?

HANDLER: It's entirely different from Poland. We could walk around wherever we wanted. We could do what we wanted. And the peculiar part of it is I came here speaking two languages, Polish and Yiddish. Inside of one year, believe it or not, I forgot all my Polish, everything, and picked up English. My mother, my father was already here three years, he knew English pretty well. My mother, during her lifetime she kept talking Yiddish. She picked up English. She could converse in English, or she preferred to speak in Yiddish.

SIGRIST: Was there a large Jewish population in Hoboken?

HANDLER: Yes, yes, there was. That's one reason we stayed there. We stayed there for two years, till the end of 1919, early 1920, he got a job here in Bayonne. So he packed us all together and we moved. Trolley cars were then in existence from Hoboken to Bayonne. And we moved here very early in January 1920.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you a few more questions about those first

couple of years. You said that they put you in kindergarten?

HANDLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what school was like for you.

HANDLER: That's embarrassing to me. The first day of kindergarten I dirtied my pants. I couldn't speak English. I didn't know what to do or what to say, so I sat there dirty until the teacher came around and smelled me and said, "Go home." I didn't understand what she meant, but she said, "Go, go." So I went home and changed my clothes, my mother changed me, and I changed myself, and that's about the only thing I remember about the school. That's the thing that stuck in my mind.

SIGRIST: How did you learn English, specifically?

HANDLER: Hanging around with the youngster there. We had a colored family living right next to us. I don't remember the last name. But they had a son who was much older than we were. He was around nineteen or twenty, and we started to talk with him. He was a

wonderful young man. He was a colored guy. I've never forgotten him. I've always wondered what ever happened to him and his parents. But he lived next door to our apartment. Whenever he came in, we went to his house. Of course, he spoke only English, so that's where we picked up most of our English, my two brothers and I. Of course, we hang around with the youngsters in the area. They spoke only English. And that's what happened. I lost all my Polish which, later on, I was sorry, because when I went to work here in the bakery with my father, the Polish, all the bakers are Polish, and they talk to each other in Polish, and I'd just have to stand there and listen. And eventually I got a few words that they spoke, it came back to me. I was able to talk to them just a little bit, to understand sometimes what they were talking about.

SIGRIST: When you were in Bayonne and you said you lived next to a black family, was this surprising to you at all? Had you seen black people in Europe?

HANDLER: No, I didn't.

SIGRIST: What were your parents' reaction to a black familY?

HANDLER: They enjoyed them. They welcomed them into our house, and we were welcomed into their house. Color didn't mean anything. To us they were human beings. They were friendly to us, and that's what we wanted.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the apartment that you lived in in Hoboken?

HANDLER: I believe it had about three or four rooms. It was a sort of a flat, four rooms in a row. Kitchen, dining room, a couple of bedrooms. One bedroom for my parents, and one bedroom for the three youngsters. And we lived there for maybe a year, moved to another apartment. In those four, three, two years that we were there we moved four times.

SIGRIST: Why was that?

HANDLER: One, the main reason was the last place that we moved to in Hoboken was across the street from the bakery where he worked. And that's the last move that we made in Hoboken. And after that we came to Bayonne.

SIGRIST: I should have asked you this earlier, but what was your father's specialty in baking? What . . .

HANDLER: Everything.

SIGRIST: Something that you remember.

HANDLER: Bread and rolls. At that time rolls were made by hand. So were the breads. Today it's all machines.

SIGRIST: Did he ever do any bread baking at home?

HANDLER: No, no. My mother did that. She baked bread at home. Sometimes, of course, he'd bring home some rolls and bread from the bakery. But whatever had to be done at home she made. She made the challahs on Friday night and Saturday, and we managed.

SIGRIST: In those first couple of years can you describe your religious life a little bit once you got here.

HANDLER: It wasn't much different than what it was in Europe. We went to, of course, we didn't go to Hebrew school in Hoboken. We were too young. But I did go, when we came to Bayonne, when I was about ten or eleven we went to what we called a cheder, which was a Hebrew school.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

HANDLER: C-H-E-D-E-R. Cheder. It's sort of a parochial school for youngsters who are studying to be bar mitzvahed.

You know what a bar mitzvah is? At thirteen this Jewish boy becomes a man, and he goes through a ritual ceremony in a synagogue or a temple or whatever, and becomes a man. And there's a period of study before he can do that stuff.

SIGRIST: And you went through your bar mitzvah here in Bayonne?

HANDLER: Yes.

SIGRIST: When did your parents start having the girls?

HANDLER: The first girl came in 1918, August.

SIGRIST: You were in Hoboken.

HANDLER: We were in Hoboken then.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories as a little boy of your mother being pregnant or any of that whole . . .

HANDLER: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

HANDLER: At that time I didn't know anything about the birds and the bees. But all I knew was she came, once in a while she came around with a big stomach, and a little later on she had no stomach, we had a baby sister.

That happened twice more in Bayonne. The first one was the only one born in Hoboken. The other two were born here in Bayonne.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Did your mother like America?

HANDLER: Oh, she loved it.

SIGRIST: Was there something about America that was very hard for her to get adjusted to?

HANDLER: No. The only thing that was hard for her was the language. She had to learn to speak English. As a matter of fact, here in Bayonne there was an organization that sent a teacher to the house to help them speak English. So she had somebody come to the house for about eighteen months or two years. It helped a lot. And at that time she really got adjusted. And she liked Bayonne, uh, Hoboken, a lot, Bayonne much better, and we were happy to be here.

SIGRIST: How old, I'm sorry, not how old, um, did she ever seek outside employment, out of the house?

HANDLER: No, no. The only employment she ever had was when my father bought the bakery. She, there was a store connected with it, so she was behind the counter there. And the older girl, Gussie, helped out in the store when she was able to, after school.

SIGRIST: So you moved to Bayonne in 1920, roughly.

HANDLER: Yes.

SIGRIST: And you said, there's a Polish community here.

HANDLER: Yes, there is. Very large.

SIGRIST: Was it a Polish-Jewish community?

HANDLER: Yes, a very large Jewish community at that time here, very large.

SIGRIST: What kinds of businesses were they involved in here?

HANDLER: Varied, all kinds you could think of. The main street, Broadway, here, had stores that catered to anything and anything you wanted. You didn't have to go out of town for anything. There were no malls at that time, no supermarkets. Mom and Pop stores, and that's where I did my business.

SIGRIST: Was Bayonne mostly an immigrant community? Were there lots of immigrants in Bayonne, of different nationalities?

HANDLER: Yes, yes, yes. Lots of, because there was oil industries here which attracted, at that time, the Standard, Texaco, all the oil companies had refineries here. It was known as the oil town, the town of industry. And the oil industries attracted mostly Polish, Slavish, the Slavish races. And they, thousands of them. And Jewish people, they were, they didn't go into the oil business. They, like everywhere else, they became merchants. Worked in Jewish stores, opened their own businesses. And wherever you saw a store on Broadway, even now, most of the stores have Jewish names on them.

SIGRIST: When your father came to Bayonne, did he get a job with someone else? Or how long did it take him?

HANDLER: He got the job before we moved. He belonged to the union.

SIGRIST: Was he commuting, then, back and forth from Bayonne?

HANDLER: He was for a while. He got the job here, on Avenue C

here, in a bakery. He got the job there, and he figured as long as he's working here, the family has to come along with him. And we came here in 1920.

SIGRIST: And how long did it take him before he had enough money to buy his own bakery?

HANDLER: Quite a few years. That was 1920, and this was in 1933.

SIGRIST: Oh, it was a long time.

HANDLER: It was long time before he had a chance to buy one. He bought out another Jewish bakery here, and he couldn't do it unless he had somebody to drive a truck because he had a retail business in the store, and the truck did the wholesale business. Now I had to learn how to drive. And I learned how.

SIGRIST: I want to ask you, actually, what was the very first job you ever got paid money for?

HANDLER: A seltzer factory. I was thirteen or fourteen. Even before I was bar mitzvahed, around the corner where I lived, or across the street, there was a seltzer factory, manufacturing seltzer and soda. The name was Friedberg, F-R-I-E-D-B-E-R-G. And they manufactured

these soft drinks and so on. And I asked him one day, I wanted to go to work. He said, "All right." I come in. I was going to high school at that time. There was a two-tier high school, afternoon session and the morning session. When I went in the morning, I worked in the afternoon. I went in the afternoon, I worked in the morning.

SIGRIST: And what were your tasks at the seltzer factory?

HANDLER: I did everything, help out. And eventually I wound up even making, bottling the stuff there, bottling the seltzer and bottling the soda.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how much you got paid?

HANDLER: Very little. I don't remember very much how much I got paid. Then about 1939, 1940 we had a problem. The landlords wanted to raise the rent in my father's bakery, and we had a disagreement, and he said, "You want the bakery? Take it." He shut it up. He closed it up entirely. He gave me the truck, the business and the debt, because there was debts to pay. And I managed to get the truck, and it took me a couple of weeks. I went around to all the customers and told them I was now the boss. And until 1941 when the war

started to backtrack, I got married a week before break, I got married in November 20, 1941, and the war broke out December 7th in '42. So I woke, I slept days, I worked nights. So when my job was done on the 7th, I woke up and went back to the stores. My wife was one week a bride then, and they told me Pearl Harbor had been bombed, the 7th of December. Of course, the war follows, and the social, the Selective Service called me four times, like I said before, and they always said, "Go back." And I kept that job until '71 or '72 when a bakery that first used my father wanted to buy my route. So we haggled for a while and I figured out I wasn't making too much money on my own, and I was near retirement, four or five years away from retirement. The more I built up my equity, the more I could get social security later on. So we decided I should do it. So I sold our business to him, and took a job with him driving a truck. I was with him until '70, the end of '75. '75, she became blind in 1970, approximately. No, a little, she became blind about twenty years. And I felt a little ashamed leaving her alone at night and going to work, leaving her all alone. So I decided, after she was alone for two years, after I retired for two

years, I was going to leave. So I left at the end of '75 when I reached sixty-five, and it's seventeen years since I quit.

SIGRIST: What is your wife's name?

HANDLER: (he calls) What's your name, wife?

SIGRIST: The microphone won't be able to . . .

HANDLER: Oh, her name is Nettie, N-E-T-T-I-E.

SIGRIST: And what is her maiden name, please?

HANDLER: Daskal, D-A-S-K-A-L. And I imported her from Brooklyn. That's where I first met her. I met her in Manhattan. I had a blind date. She worked in a firm on, near Broadway. And one of her bosses was a woman who, Nettie was asking for a raise. And she said, "If you want the raise, you got to go out on a date with me. I got a guy for you, it's a double date." So she agreed. Here we are.

SIGRIST: The rest is history.

HANDLER: Fifty-one years later.

SIGRIST: Wow. Children?

HANDLER: Two sons, Steve, he's going to be fifty in July, and Larry, who's going to be forty-eight in October. They each have two children, our four grandchildren. Steve lives in Edison. It's only about an hour from here. The other one, after he graduated from U. Conn in Connecticut met a girl there and he stayed there until about approximately a year ago when he got a job in Milwaukee. When he lived in Connecticut, it was a three-hour drive and we were there. I can't take a three-hour drive to Milwaukee. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: No, indeed not.

HANDLER: So that's where he is right now. As a matter of fact, he'll be in tonight. He's going to Madison Square Garden to see a basketball game.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you first started working for your dad?

HANDLER: That was in '30, about 1940. I always figure my age by the year, less ten. So I was born in 1909, I came here in 1910. So I was nine years old.

SIGRIST: Did either your father or your mother ever want to go back to Poland?

HANDLER: No! As a matter of fact, I don't either. Because I have no actual recollection of it. That time went through two wars. I was asked, about ten, twelve years ago my wife and I wanted to visit Israel. So we applied for passports. She got hers without any problem. I got a letter back I can't get any, you're not a citizen. 1922 my father became a citizen in this country, and on his papers I'm listed as being a citizen because I, at that time anybody below twenty-one, including the wife and children under twenty-one, automatically became citizens, so I became a citizen automatically. But I had problems. The bureaucrat in Philadelphia refused to recognize it, so I sent him the papers. His, my father's citizenship papers, and he sent it back, it's not good. He doesn't recognize it. That's bureaucracy. So I got a hold of my lawyer here in town and he said, "You've got to get your papers from the high school to show that you were admitted to school here." I got that and I sent it to him, still no good. Finally I went to my Congressman. I wrote to him. He said he'll take care of it. He did. He wrote a letter to him, and I got my papers back and my passport, only a couple of days later. And that came only about a week before I was supposed

to leave. So we were on pins and needles until we got that passport.

SIGRIST: Indeed. It's interesting how in your life so many things that have happened in the distant past . . .

HANDLER: Come back.

SIGRIST: Had such a profound effect later on.

HANDLER: Later on. This certainly did affect me that time, and I couldn't get the passport. My son and daughter-in-law also went with us, together with their two children. So we really had a wonderful time then.

SIGRIST: Well, Mr. Handler, I guess I have one final question for you.

HANDLER: Go right ahead.

SIGRIST: I think we've gotten you right through your life pretty efficiently. Are you happy that your father made the decision in 1914 to come here?

HANDLER: Oh, definitely, very definitely. I don't know if I would be here today if I hadn't left Poland. As I said, we went through two wars. The First World War wasn't as bad as the second one, because the second

one you had the Nazis and the Holocaust. If I hadn't been gone, if I hadn't lived through the first one, I definitely would not have lived through the second one. So here I am very happy and very proud to be an American.

SIGRIST: Oh. Well, thank you, Mr. Handler. It was a pleasure.

HANDLER: It was my pleasure having you here. Now you want your coffee? (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Let me just sign off, please. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Nathan Handler in Bayonne on March 12, 1993.