

EI-266

BERNICE SAKOWSKI CHARTIER

BIRTH DATE: JULY 12, 1902

INTERVIEW DATE: 3/27/1993

RUNNING TIME: 33:00

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

**INTERVIEW LOCATION: COUNTRYSIDE HEALTHCARE FACILITY
BRISTOL, CONNECTICUT**

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 3/1994

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 5/1994

POLAND, 1913

AGE 11

PORT OF EMBARCATION IN GERMANY

**RESIDENCES: SHRUDLIN
BRISTOL, CT**

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Saturday, March 27, 1993. I am here at the Countryside Manor Health Care Center in Bristol, Connecticut with Bernice Chartier, who came from Poland in 1913 when she was eleven years old. Present also in the room are her granddaughter Laura LeClair and Ken Lipchez from The Bristol Press newspaper. Good morning, and can we start with you giving me your birth date, please. Do you remember what your birth date?

CHARTIER: My birthday?

SIGRIST: Yes.

CHARTIER: 1902.

SIGRIST: What month?

CHARTIER: I was born in 1902.

SIGRIST: What month and day? Do you remember?

CHARTIER: July, July 12.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

CHARTIER: I was born in Poland.

SIGRIST: Where in Poland?

CHARTIER: Oh, boy. I wouldn't know. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Was it a small town, or . . .

CHARTIER: I don't know.

SIGRIST: You don't know. Well, where did you live when you were a little girl in Poland? Do you remember that?

CHARTIER: Yes. I was in a village, in a village named Shrudlin. I was living in that village, you know. I remember.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what that village looked like to

me, please?

CHARTIER: Well, just like in, it's not a city, it's not a farm, but the house is just like this for most of it. (she gestures)

SIGRIST: Were most people farmers in that city, town?

CHARTIER: Not real farmers, but they have a, like an acre or two acres or half an acre of land. That's how they were in that village where I came from.

SIGRIST: Did they own their land, or did they work for somebody else?

CHARTIER: They own it. Usually they own it.

SIGRIST: What kinds of food, vegetables, do people grow in Poland?

CHARTIER: Well, potatoes and sweet peas and big beans, regular beans. I forgot the name of it. And carrots, parsley, pumpkins, big pumpkins.

SIGRIST: A lot of food that could be stored for the winter.

CHARTIER: Yes. Oh, they stored it all right.

SIGRIST: How did they store food for the winter?

CHARTIER: They dig, oh, now I remember. They dig in the ground, oh, about that high, about all this deep. (she gestures) And they put the steps, ladders like, you know, so you can walk in and you can walk out. And they store that, potatoes, carrots. They store it. Oh, and they make a roof, like, from the, over it. See, like here is a square hole, but they make a roof just like this, you know. (she gestures) And when it rained, of course, you know, the rain don't go in that hole. It just slide out. Now you understand me?

SIGRIST: Yes, yes. Thank you. Tell me a little bit about, did people raise animals in this town?

CHARTIER: I can't tell you too much. I was too young.

SIGRIST: Can you describe your house for me, the house that you lived in?

CHARTIER: Well, we have two rooms but, of course, in the kitchen, the kitchen was very big. There was a bed, too, on the side. The family was growing bigger, and they didn't want to put the addition. That's how I remember. And for the vegetables, they dig

the big, square hole, very deep, and they make the roof over it, and the steps.

SIGRIST: Was that near the house, or was that far away?

CHARTIER: No. There's only maybe about fifteen feet, twenty feet away.

SIGRIST: So it's very close.

CHARTIER: That's where they put the vegetables for the winter. And they make the steps over there so you can, like here's the roof, and they make the steps inside so you could go down and get the vegetables, and then you come up again.

SIGRIST: What was your house made out of?

CHARTIER: Oh, boy.

SIGRIST: Do you remember?

CHARTIER: Some people have brick houses, just like over here, and some people just wooden houses. We have a wooden house.

SIGRIST: How did you keep your house warm? Was there a fireplace in the house or a stove?

CHARTIER: No fireplace, just a stove. And we, we only have two rooms, only bedroom, one bedroom, but we have a bed in the kitchen too, because it was a big kitchen. The little tots, you know, sleep in the kitchen.

SIGRIST: Was that the warmest place in the house?

CHARTIER: It's the warmest place in the house.

SIGRIST: Who lived in this house with you when you were a little girl? Who lived in the house?

CHARTIER: Well, my mother and my father.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

CHARTIER: Vladisv Sakowski.

SIGRIST: Oh, dear. Can you spell any of that, please?

CHARTIER: V-L-A-D-I-S-V. Vladisv.

SIGRIST: And then can you spell his last name, your maiden name?

CHARTIER: S-A-K-O-W-S-K-I. Sakowski.

SIGRIST: What did your father look like when you were a

little girl?

CHARTIER: Uh, he wasn't bad looking. That's all I can say. But he wasn't so nice looking. But I didn't care for him. I didn't like my father. I loved my mother.

SIGRIST: Was your father around a lot?

CHARTIER: My father was in and out. He come to the United States again about four times back and forth. And he leave me and my mother and my brother and my sister in Poland, but once in a while he sent a little bit of money from this country.

SIGRIST: What kind of jobs did he have in America?

CHARTIER: I wouldn't know that, no. I was the youngest one in the family.

SIGRIST: So your brothers and sisters are older than you are.

CHARTIER: I was wondering what was so hot and heavy over here.

SIGRIST: She is referring to her microphone. What was your mother's name?

CHARTIER: Marciana. They say, "Marciana."

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

CHARTIER: Kaminsky.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

CHARTIER: K-O, no, K-A-M-I-N-S-K-Y.

SIGRIST: And let me ask you the same question. What did your mother look like when you were a little girl?

CHARTIER: Oh, my goodness. She was beautiful to me.

SIGRIST: What was her personality like?

CHARTIER: My mother was an angel. My father was a devil. That's how I feel about it. My father, he was here, he came to this country, I don't know, three or four times, back and forth. And he left the family in the United States. And he wasn't good over here. He wasn't behaving. So all of a sudden he go back to his family, and my mother, you know, she was a beautiful mom, and she was hard-working. That's all I can tell you.

SIGRIST: So you really didn't see your father very much. He was in America mostly. Yes? No?

CHARTIER: Wait a minute, how old I was. I was married, you know, at sixteen.

SIGRIST: Yes, but you were here, you were in America by then.

CHARTIER: Over here, yes. And when I got married, then he went to Poland, took my mother.

SIGRIST: Oh, and they went back.

CHARTIER: They went back.

SIGRIST: Oh. Well, that's interesting. Did they not like it in America?

CHARTIER: My mother like it, but my father, he was, as I say, he was, to me he was a punk.

SIGRIST: Well, we'll skip your father for a while.
(he laughs) Let me ask you about church life when you were a little girl in Poland. Was there a church in town?

CHARTIER: Church wasn't in town. There was a little city named Dunova. That's where the church was. And me, I came from the village.

SIGRIST: Yeah. So you would have to walk to church?

CHARTIER: Oh, yes. When we got bigger sometimes, you know, the buggy, the horse and buggy took us to church. And, of course, waiting till we get out.

SIGRIST: Was your mother a religious woman?

CHARTIER: My mother was very nice and beautiful and very good, and she was religious.

SIGRIST: And what religion were you?

CHARTIER: Catholic.

SIGRIST: And how did you practice your religion at home?

CHARTIER: Well, we'd say our prayers. Like when we get up in the morning, before breakfast, we have to kneel down, my mother, she teach us, kneel down and say a prayer. Then again at night say a prayer before we went to bed.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of those prayers?

CHARTIER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Could you say one for us in Polish?

CHARTIER: (she recites a prayer in Polish)

SIGRIST: And what prayer was that?

CHARTIER: (she sighs) (Polish), that means, "Dear God."
It's everything, you know, about God, you know, and
pray to St. Mary, you know, in that prayer.

SIGRIST: Thank you very much. That was nice.

CHARTIER: That's all I can explain.

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl, did you like going to
church?

CHARTIER: When I was a little girl, I wasn't going to church
because it was far away at this village, in town,
and I was living in the village. So I was, usually
I was stuck on the farm.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when you were a little girl in
Poland how you celebrated Christmas?

CHARTIER: Yes. We have a, we make a Christmas, we put the, we
chop the tree off, put what you call it, in the
bedroom, because we only have a kitchen and a
bedroom. Sometime, you know, we saw the place. We
only have a kitchen, and there were two beds in the
kitchen.

SIGRIST: And what else did you do for Christmas? You put the tree up in the bedroom. What else would happen?

CHARTIER: Not every year we didn't put, you know, Christmas tree, because we didn't have nothing to put on the Christmas tree.

SIGRIST: What would you put on the Christmas tree?

CHARTIER: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Did you give presents at Christmas time?

CHARTIER: I don't remember presents. We were poor people.

SIGRIST: Was there a dinner? Did you have Christmas dinner together?

CHARTIER: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Was there a school in your village?

CHARTIER: No, not in the village.

SIGRIST: So did you go to school when you lived in Poland?

CHARTIER: No.

SIGRIST: How did you learn to read?

CHARTIER: You know what? You're asking me. I don't know how I learned. But I can, I can read and write in Polish.

SIGRIST: Could your mother read and write?

CHARTIER: No, my father did.

SIGRIST: Did he learn in Poland or in America?

CHARTIER: Who?

SIGRIST: Your father.

CHARTIER: I don't know. I didn't like my father.

SIGRIST: Right, right. You told us that. What did you do for fun when you were a little girl in Poland?

CHARTIER: Well, running around and throwing things around. Oh, my mother make a doll. She took an old stocking and she packed with something, and she makes a doll, you know, there, "Here's your present."

SIGRIST: So pretty much all your entertainment you had to make yourself.

CHARTIER: That's right.

SIGRIST: One thing I forgot to ask you, can you name your brothers and sisters for me?

CHARTIER: Yes. I have a sister Stella. That means Sasha in Polish. And I have a brother Stanley. And who else I have? And me, of course, Bernice.

SIGRIST: And you were the youngest.

CHARTIER: Brinswava.

SIGRIST: Did any of your brothers or sisters, did any of them go to America when you were a little girl?

CHARTIER: No. They got married, you know, and they just live away, you know, with the husbands on a farm somewheres. I never know even where, because I was the youngest one in the family.

SIGRIST: Was it mostly just you and your mom in the house?

CHARTIER: Well, when my father was in this country in America, only me and my mom. Or my brother, Stanley. But after he went away, so only me and my mom.

SIGRIST: Where did Stanley go?

CHARTIER: I don't know. I don't remember. They have a big

farms, you know, rich people, and they hire those people to work for them. So he was somewhere in Poland, working on a farm and living there.

SIGRIST: So he was kind of farmed out, in a way, to make some money.

CHARTIER: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: How much older was Stanley? How much older was he than you?

CHARTIER: How much older?

SIGRIST: Yes. Was he a lot older than you were?

CHARTIER: I was the youngest one. That's all I know.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you remember, do you remember any kind of music, perhaps? Was your mother a musical person?

CHARTIER: No. She didn't have no time for that. She work all the time, you know, outside, inside, outside, inside. My father was three different times in this country here, back and forth. My mother was, she managed to work the farm up herself and take care of the children.

SIGRIST: So you had your own plot of land also, like . . .

CHARTIER: Oh, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Did you keep any animals on your farm? What did you keep?

CHARTIER: Yes. I have a couple of cows, sometimes only one cow. We have a horse. And we have pigs, sometimes two or three pigs, and the baby pigs.

SIGRIST: Did you slaughter the animals yourself?

CHARTIER: Well, my mother have somebody when they grow, you know, big already. Something, meat to eat. So she hired somebody to slaughter them, one.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what that was like as a little girl, watching that?

CHARTIER: Oh, I didn't watch that. I wouldn't watch that. I'd scramble. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Did you eat the meat, or did your mother sell the meat?

CHARTIER: She didn't sell the meat. We eat the meat.

SIGRIST: Do you remember some of the kinds of foods your

mother made?

CHARTIER: She made klewski, dumplings. That means dumplings.

And make all kind of soups from the grains. She made the dumplings. She scraped the potatoes and she put one egg and she put the flour in it, then she made the dumplings like this. Then she just dropped with a spoon, yeah, with a spoon, when the water was boiling. And they were good. Even today I would like to have it.

SIGRIST: Was that kind of a typical dinner for you to have?

CHARTIER: Yes. But, of course, you know, it was just a plain dinner, mashed potatoes or, I don't remember too much.

SIGRIST: Solid food.

CHARTIER: Well, I was only eleven years old when I came here to the United States.

SIGRIST: Now, was it your father who wanted to bring you and your mother over to this country? Tell me a little bit about how that all happened.

CHARTIER: I have to think myself now. My father was here

three different times in the United States, back and forth. Finally the third time he sent after me and my mom. That's how it happened I'm here. The other children, my brother and my sister, they get married, they live on their own.

SIGRIST: Did your mother want to come to America?

CHARTIER: Well, I don't know, but she came. Me and my mom came.

SIGRIST: Do you remember packing to come? What did you take with you when you came?

CHARTIER: I don't remember that. That didn't interest me.

SIGRIST: What did you know about America as a little girl in Poland?

CHARTIER: Nothing.

SIGRIST: Did you want to come to this country?

CHARTIER: I was only not quite eleven years old. So what the child wants? A different doll? She satisfied.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what port you left from?

CHARTIER: We went to Germany.

SIGRIST: How did you get to Germany?

CHARTIER: You know what? I don't know. But, anyway, we sleep in a hotel overnight, till the ship come in. And the ship's name was, I think, Ruby Rosa.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, was this the first time that you had ever traveled a long distance to get somewhere?

CHARTIER: It's the first time, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories of what that, of things that happened when you were on your way to Germany at all? Does anything stick out in your mind about that experience?

CHARTIER: No. I don't even know if there was a horses, buggies, no, or a car. There were no cars at that time.

SIGRIST: Or a train, perhaps.

CHARTIER: No. There wasn't any trains.

SIGRIST: You didn't go on the train.

CHARTIER: We went to Berlin, Germany. Berlin, oh, Berlin. That city. And from there, over there we sleep in a

hotel, my mom and I, overnight until the ship come in. The ship's name was Ruby Rosa. That I remember, I'll never forget.

SIGRIST: What did the ship look like?

CHARTIER: Oh, my gosh! Now, what else you want to know? You know what those ships looks like.

SIGRIST: But I want to hear what you thought it looked like as a little girl.

CHARTIER: Well, that ship have a deck, and we live, like, you know, sleep under the deck, you know, with the windows about that round. (she gestures) And water was splashing against it while we were sleeping in bed. And then in the morning we get up, and we went on the deck. Most of the time we were on the deck. But in the back of the ship there was a deck, too. But the rich people, they were higher. You have to go up the stairs to get there, and when they see a little girl like me, I was running back and forth, they throw me goodies. I remember that.

SIGRIST: What were you like as a little girl? How would you describe yourself as a little girl?

CHARTIER: I didn't have no idea. I was just a little girl. I didn't even, I don't think I looked in the mirror.
(she laughs)

SIGRIST: Was the boat ride exciting for you, or was it scary?

CHARTIER: It was a little scary, but the people, because that boat have another deck, higher, in the back of the ship, and all rich people there. When they see me, they throw me a lot of goodies.

SIGRIST: Do you remember there being a storm while you were on the boat at all?

CHARTIER: No, I don't remember that.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick on the boat?

CHARTIER: No. My mother was.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your mother getting sick.
What was that like?

CHARTIER: She was sick to her stomach.

SIGRIST: Did they give her medicine?

CHARTIER: I don't know about that.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what it looked like where you slept? What did it actually look like where you slept?

CHARTIER: Just like, there was a bunk against the wall, and my mother sleep downstairs, like in a, and I was sleeping above her with the bunks, you know, against the wall.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of people . . .

CHARTIER: Hey, you make me tired!

SIGRIST: We're almost to America. (he laughs) Were there lots of people in this room, or was it just you and your mom?

CHARTIER: Oh, no. There was maybe about four more.

SIGRIST: Do you know how long the boat ride took?

CHARTIER: I remember before I wondered if I can, I think it was twelve days and nights. (a disruption is heard in the background) Let me ask you. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you came into New York Harbor?

CHARTIER: If I what?

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

CHARTIER: Yes, I did.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

CHARTIER: Very little, because, and from there we had to come to New York, I think, and take a train or something to come to Bristol.

SIGRIST: Do you remember coming through Ellis Island where you were processed?

CHARTIER: Yes. We were, there was Ellis Island I'm just talking about. And my mother they ask, people come in a line, like, you know. And there's a guy asking all the questions, you know. You're in a line. And the other guy, or a lady in another line. "Where you come from? How old are you? Where you come from? Why you want to come to America?" And all those questions. I was only eleven years old. Do I have to tell you everything?

SIGRIST: Was it very crowded there?

CHARTIER: Sort of. I have good because like a ship, it's a deck over here. And, you know, in back of the ship,

and the deck, the steps in the back, and there's the rich people there. And when they see the little girl running around, they were throwing me things, goodies.

SIGRIST: When you were at Ellis Island was it very, what was that like to be a little girl at Ellis Island?

CHARTIER: We weren't there long, maybe just overnight.

SIGRIST: You had to stay overnight, you think?

CHARTIER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember about staying overnight at Ellis Island?

CHARTIER: No, I don't remember that.

SIGRIST: Did someone come and meet you at Ellis Island?

CHARTIER: No. We just came to New York after that, that's all I know, me and my mom.

SIGRIST: Where did you go from New York?

CHARTIER: We came to Bristol, I believe.

SIGRIST: Do you remember having your tag on you? Did they

put a tag on you at Ellis Island?

CHARTIER: Some kind of thing, yes. And my mom, you know, she couldn't remember everything, so she always had me in front of her. I know more about it, you know. I answered the question more than she did. She couldn't write, she couldn't read. And me I could write and read already in Polish. So I was smarter than her.

SIGRIST: You kind of had to take care of your mother.

CHARTIER: Yes, sort of.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you a question. What was your mother's reaction to, her initial reaction to America? What did she think when she first got here?

CHARTIER: She was very happy, but scared.

SIGRIST: What was she scared of?

CHARTIER: Well, it's a different country and different everything.

SIGRIST: When did you finally meet your father?

CHARTIER: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Was he in Bristol?

CHARTIER: He must be.

SIGRIST: Where did you go to live in Bristol?

CHARTIER: Oh, my! What else are you going to ask me?!

SIGRIST: Did you go to a house or an apartment, or did you have family? Where did you go to live?

CHARTIER: Where my father was rooming, you know. Those people have overnight. Then afterwards my father was working for a different place. So he got it, I believe, I don't know for sure. So we move out on our own.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your father's job was in Bristol, what he was doing for a living?

CHARTIER: He was working in Session's Foundry.

SIGRIST: What was he doing there?

CHARTIER: I wouldn't know. They made the iron over there and everything, you know, so I wouldn't know any more.

SIGRIST: You said that you went out and you moved on to your own, your family.

CHARTIER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did you, can you tell me, can you describe the building, the house that you lived in, the apartment?

CHARTIER: No, I can't, I can't.

SIGRIST: Did you live there a long time?

CHARTIER: I don't know how long. Hey, that's too much for my poor mind.

SIGRIST: Okay. All right. Well, maybe we should stop now. Are you tired? Do you want to end?

CHARTIER: Yeah. I am tired! Look at how old I am now!

SIGRIST: Okay.

CHARTIER: Hey, Laura, tell him how old I am.

MRS. CHARTIER'S GRANDDAUGHTER: She's ninety.

CHARTIER: Yeah. Ninety years old. What do you expect?

SIGRIST: I want to thank you very much.

CHARTIER: My gosh, you know, you . . .

MRS. CHARTIER'S GRANDDAUGHTER: Paul, she had one incident where a woman had offered her a banana, and she had never saw a banana before.

CHARTIER: Oh, no. I never see a banana before.

SIGRIST: Tell me about the woman offering you the banana.

MRS. CHARTIER'S GRANDDAUGHTER: When she got to Ellis Island the woman had, remember?

CHARTIER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you tell that?

CHARTIER: I want to eat banana with the skin. That's how I was. She said, "No, take off the skin." I never see banana in Poland?

SIGRIST: Was there anything else in America that you had never seen before?

CHARTIER: A lot of things I didn't see before, because we have a little farm in Poland.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things were new to you when you came to America?

CHARTIER: What kind of what?

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you see in America that you had never seen before?

CHARTIER: A lot of things. I just can't describe, because. In Poland they have just the vegetables, what I raised. And they big, big place you know, they dig out. They make the roof for it, and they put the vegetables in there so they won't freeze during the winter.

SIGRIST: Did you do that in America, too?

CHARTIER: No.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever learn English?

CHARTIER: No.

SIGRIST: How did you learn English?

CHARTIER: Well, as I was growing. I was eleven years old.

SIGRIST: Did they put you in school?

CHARTIER: I went to school, yes. I don't know for how long.

SIGRIST: Did you like school?

CHARTIER: I wasn't crazy about it. (she laughs) Laura, you know everything, everything I went through.

SIGRIST: Well, Mrs. Chartier, I want to thank you very much for letting me come out here and pick your brain and ask you some questions about coming over here from Poland. This is . . .

CHARTIER: He reminds me of a lot of things, yes. I'm not thinking no more, you know. So now today, no. You're marking down everything.

KEN LIPCHEZ: Everything. I'm recording, too.

CHARTIER: Oh, my gosh! I'd better scramble! I'm going to run!

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service with Bernice Chartier in Bristol, Connecticut.