

EI-270

**CELINA SMUZEWSKI LARSEN**

**BIRTH DATE: SEPTEMBER 17, 1907**

**INTERVIEW DATE: 3/29/1993**

**RUNNING TIME: 1:00:15**

**INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**

**RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME**

**INTERVIEW LOCATION: NEWINGTON, CT**

**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 8/1994**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 2/1995**

**POLAND (BORN U.S.), 1926**

**AGE 19**

**PORT OF EMBARCATION: HAMBURG**

**RESIDENCES: SKEMPY**

**NEW BRITAIN, CT**

Oral Historian's Note: Mrs. Larsen is the wife of Knud Larsen, EI-267. He was present during this interview. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of the Oral History Project, 2/8/1995.

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is for the Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Monday, March 29, 1993. I'm here in Newington, Connecticut with Celina Larsen, the wife of Knud Larsen. Mrs. Larsen was born in West Virginia and returned to Poland with her mother in 1908 when she was six months old, and then returned to America in 1926. Good morning.

LARSEN: Good morning.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Larsen, can you give me your birth date, please?

LARSEN: My birth date?

SIGRIST: Yes.

LARSEN: September 17, 1907.

SIGRIST: What is your maiden name?

LARSEN: Smuzewski.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

LARSEN: S-M-U-Z-E-W-S-K-I.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me why you were born in West Virginia?

LARSEN: Because my family came. My mother, my father and two sisters and a brother were born in Poland, and they came to the United States to try to get a better living.

SIGRIST: Do you know what year they came?

LARSEN: That I don't know. I wish I could have probably figured out if I know, but I don't. And they settled in Monongah, West Virginia.

SIGRIST: What work did your father have?

LARSEN: My father mostly worked in mines, in the mines, coal

mine. They got the large coal mine. From what I understand, it was. And in 1907 the mine, they had a big explosion. Almost two thousand people were killed. And, of course, my father was killed. My brother was going to work somewhere else but around the mines, and he was killed and ripped to pieces. They finally, later they found his arms, his legs, his head different places. And my oldest sister ( she clears her throat ) that was going to work, too, on a bridge. She was young yet. She was about twelve, thirteen years, but she worked. And she was on a small bridge when the mine exploded. She just fell on her knees and she couldn't get up until somebody later picked her up and brought her home. So my mother was, I was only three months old then, and that was Christmas Eve. My mother had a very good friend, the Polish priest, had a parish there, and he was very nice to us. I was left, when my father was, that's what I was told. She just left me, I was three months old, let me on a bed, and went to the mine to look for her husband and her son. And I was there for hours until Father Lexton came to visit her, to talk to her after the, but she wasn't there. So he said he picked me up. I was crying. And he even changed the diapers

and everything. ( she is moved ) Somehow I survived.

SIGRIST: What was your dad's name?

LARSEN: Andrew.

SIGRIST: What was your mom's name?

LARSEN: Salamoai.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

LARSEN: S-A-L-A-M-O-A-I.

SIGRIST: Do you know what her maiden name was?

LARSEN: No, I don't. Oh, yes. Yes, I do. Wojciechowski.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

LARSEN: ( she laughs ) W-O-J-C-I-E-C-H-O-W-S-K-I.

SIGRIST: I see. Thank you. Your mother is faced with a terrible tragedy, obviously.

LARSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Why did she decide to return to Poland?

LARSEN: She couldn't get over the tragedy in here. My two oldest sisters, that they were born in Poland and they

came with them. They begged her to stay, but she said she just couldn't take it. For some reason, she thought she'll feel better in Poland. Because she was born there and brought up there. She had some family left there. So she thought it would be better. I wish she had stayed. It would have been better for me and for my other sister Emily that went back to Poland, and one of my brothers, too, that was three of us she took back to Poland, and two sisters stayed in the United States.

SIGRIST: Did they stay in West Virginia?

LARSEN: No. One stayed in West Virginia, and later on she moved to New Jersey. And my other sister married Father Lexton's brother, who came from Italy. He was studying to be a priest, but in the last minute decided that that wasn't for him. So he came and he played organ in the church. They fall in love, and she married him. But she wasn't the kind of person that could go on time to work, so they decided that they will, he is going to study for the doctor. His brother helped him a little bit, and my sister worked and he studied in Philadelphia and became a doctor.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you remember anything else about the mine explosion that you can think of, any other stories that you heard later on, or anything your mother might have said later on about that whole experience?

LARSEN: A lot of tragedies. That's about all I heard. My mother didn't even like to talk about it. And you can see when my husband says he didn't have Christmases, my father and my brother were killed on Christmas Eve, so that was a very, very depressing time for us.

SIGRIST: Yeah, very sad.

LARSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where in Poland did you return to?

LARSEN: We went back to Poland to a very small village. Their closest small city was Skempy.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

LARSEN: ( she laughs ) S-K-E-M-P-Y, I'm pretty sure. No. Yeah, I'm pretty sure. Yeah. But my mother, she got a little money from the, from the mines. Not very much, but a little money to buy a small farm where she lived before. So she took the three children, my

brother Kasmir, my sister Emily and myself, to Poland, but I was very little at that time. And my sister was about three years older, and my brother was five years older than I. And she tried to run a little farm that way.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what it was like growing up, memories that you have about growing up on this farm.

LARSEN: Well, for the longest time, of course, I was so small by the time I grew up I only remember my mother working on a farm all the time, and my brother with her. And there was some nice neighbors that helped her, because she couldn't hire, but they'd help each other. I remember her taking me to the field with a pillow and put it on the ground. And even when I was very sick once, I had a high fever, she told me after. She just said, "Well, if God takes you, it's all right, and if he doesn't she'll survive." Because there was nothing, there was no doctor. There was no nurses. To ask even about what was wrong, but she thought I had, I had a rash, so it must have been in, I don't know what you would call it here.

SIGRIST: So it's very primitive over there. Can you describe

the house?

LARSEN: Yeah, very primitive. Beautiful, though. The farms were beautiful, were they. Well, my mother, finally my brother helped quite a bit when, we had rye growing, potatoes, beets, carrots. So we had enough to, for ourselves. My mother raised chickens and geese, and she would sell the eggs. And she would sell the chickens, a lot of chickens. She started to raise little later of times, we got a little bigger to help her, pigs, little pigs. My brother, they always killed one when she was big enough or around Christmas time or so. So we had, we had some meat to eat.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the slaughtering of the animals? Do you have any memories of that?

LARSEN: I couldn't see it. Yeah, I remember. I remember my brother cutting off a chicken, cutting her neck off. And she jumped after that, and I couldn't look at that any more after that. But he says, "Well, we have to do it." That's the way they used to kill them, evidently, at that time. He put it on a stump, on a wooden stump, and cut the neck off.

SIGRIST: What kind of foods did you eat on this farm?

LARSEN: What kind of what?

SIGRIST: Foods. What kind of foods did you eat?

LARSEN: Food? Well, we had potatoes, we had rye that my mother, that my brother used to take to the mill wheels. And they would make flour, wheat flour most of the time. And we used to raise linen, I don't know how you, linen, but the seeds from the linen, we had made oil out of it, so we used for cooking and frying. Of course, my mother had a cow. A little later she had two or three, and as the time went on she could save money and get a little more.

SIGRIST: What chores did you have as a little girl? What was your responsibility on this farm?

LARSEN: My biggest responsibility, my sister watched the cows when they put them in the field, because she liked that. And I was always helping my mother cooking. I remember when we had a harvest, we had a harvest, I had to cook for about eight people, and I was, my Lord, about seven, eight years old. But we did. I liked to do that. And, of course, I had to help my mother.

SIGRIST: What kinds of foods would you cook? Do you remember specifically?

LARSEN: Yes. I remember. Most of the time when we had people like that, I had to peel the potatoes, grate them, strain them a little bit. I remember that, because I still make them. And then put some flours in it, and put it on a wooden board, and make little, put it in a boiling, big pot of boiling water. And I made, we called them klusky. And then my mother would put little cottage cheese in it, and a little sour cream, and we had a big bowl on the table of it and some bread with it and some coffee, most of the time. It wasn't coffee like here. It was mostly made out of chicory, very bitter. But they liked it, so.  
( she laughs ) I drink milk.

SIGRIST: What did the inside of the house look like? Can you describe the inside of the house for me?

LARSEN: We had only one big room that my mother slept and my sister and I, in that big room. And we had a stove, I remember, for heating, with a lot of pipes way up to the ceiling, so that made it warm. And we had very small room next to it, very small one, that my brother

slept. And as to the other side of the little, it wasn't big. It was just one of the, one of those houses that you see over there with a straw . . .

SIGRIST: Like a cottage.

LARSEN: Yeah. And, of course, we had barns there, too. But, anyway, and we had a small kitchen with a brick oven made up, not oven, but for burning. My mother used to put the big pots overhead. I remember the black pots. And that's how she cooked.

SIGRIST: What religion were you?

LARSEN: Religion? Catholic.

SIGRIST: Was there a church in this village?

LARSEN: Oh, no. We had to walk to church for about, but we went every Sunday. That's what helped my mother to go through, her faith.

SIGRIST: Talk to me a little bit about how you practiced your religion in Poland.

LARSEN: How what?

SIGRIST: How did you practice your religion in Poland? Tell me

about going to church and how it helped your mother.

LARSEN: Well, my mother was not educated. She could hardly sign her name. But her faith in God was so strong, and that all came from the Catholic religion. She would walk, she was tired, but she would walk, and she'd take us to church five European miles, and that was quite a distance. And we didn't have good roads. We had sandy roads and woods to go through, but we went.

SIGRIST: How did you practice your religion at home?

LARSEN: We said prayers in the morning, and prayers at night. Thank God for what we had. In the morning this was kind of fast, I have to admit. I remember because there was so much work to be done, you know, to feed the animals. And when the spring came and summer, of course, we had to, we had the haying, we had the planting, we had the weeding. I remember I used to love it, six o'clock in the morning, go and do the weeding outside. It was so beautiful outside. The sun was just coming out, and birds, there were so many birds we had were singing. It was really, it felt good to do some work.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the prayers that you said?

LARSEN: Well, I'd been trying ever since I come back to learn the prayers. You know, I was American born. Nobody could understand, but when I came I didn't say, I didn't know one word in English. So I was trying so hard to learn everything in English. The Polish is fine. I can take a Polish book and read it. But all the other things, first of all, I was American. I was born here. And I felt since I came, I have to accept totally that I am American. So I kind of forgot, I have to admit, some other ones of them, you know, like Our Father, and Hail Mary, and short ones. I would remember, and I don't even say them now, because we try to talk English all the time. So . . .

SIGRIST: You keep telling me that it was very beautiful, you know, beautiful countryside, but you're basically painting a life of very hard work.

LARSEN: Very.

SIGRIST: A lot of very hard work.

LARSEN: But, you see, we were brought up with that. My mother couldn't do it herself. She just said, "You have to

help me. I can't do it." So we didn't even think about it, not to help her.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's personality like?

LARSEN: Very quick. That's one personality that I kind of disagree with, but . . .

SIGRIST: Quick, how do you mean quick?

LARSEN: She reacted quickly to everything, if we done something that we shouldn't have done. I remember one thing. My sister used to, she was three years older than I, but she used to watch the cattle that we had. We had one horse, we had cattle. And then the cattle grew, so we had a little more after, so she had to watch them. And you have to not let them go on anybody else's land. They had those fields. My sister got together with others and she forgot the cows. And they went and destroyed some neighbor that he started to raise the rye, the whole field of it, and they were just very small yet. You know, when the cattle goes through it, it ruins it. I never saw my mother so angry as at that, at my sister. She really kind of lost control at that time. She beat her up so hard that I couldn't watch it. She says, "If you say

something and you promise, you do it."

( she is moved )

SIGRIST: A lot of pent up anger, probably.

LARSEN: Yeah. I think from the sorrow she had she never quite got rid of it when her husband and her son was killed.

SIGRIST: A tremendous tragedy and responsibility to bear.

LARSEN: So she never quite got that out of her system. I think, I reasoned out afterwards. So we tried not to do anything, too.

SIGRIST: Tell me about how World War One affected your family.

LARSEN: Well, it affected us, all of a sudden, I don't remember what month that was. See, I wish I could, but I can't. In 1914, see, I was seven years old then. We heard this big noise. We couldn't understand what, you have to remember one thing. I'm going to retract a little bit. We were, the part my mother was under belonged to Russia, but it wasn't too far from where it was occupied by Germany. So when the war started, it started Germany with Russia. And it started closer to Germany. So the Russians pushed

their army towards the Germans. And my mother, at the beginning, the whole farm was covered with Russian soldiers. And my mother's little home, the officers were in it. So it started too badly when there was, it came closer to each other. When we were, they stayed there for about maybe two weeks before it really started to, and now it started really badly. I have to say this, that the Russians, that's my remembrance as a child, when they were there the officers, we almost enjoyed them because they were very nice when they had something to eat, something like chocolates, that we never had for a long time, still would share with us. They would let my mother cook little something for us. And they were nice. At night they used to start singing those beautiful Russian songs. And that, it wasn't so bad. We thought, well, maybe the war will pass and we won't have any more. Of course, my mother knew better, but she didn't say anything to us. So when the Germans were coming closer in my big, biggest room, in my mother's home, it was a dug-in place under the floor. We had wooden floors, and the doors could open for it. She kept a lot of vegetables there before. And the rest of the vegetables my brother would bury

outside under the ground so it would wouldn't freeze.

But when the war was coming close, we had to go underneath and stay there, my sister and I. My brother didn't. He didn't want to. He was already bigger. He wanted to be with my mother. And I never forget, the bullets were going through our home. So much noise, so much house we were underneath. And they, the Russians started to retreat slowly. And whatever we had, whatever anybody had, the Russians took with them. And we somehow, my mother wanted to go with the Russians. We had a horse. I remember my brother saddled a horse to the carriage, to the wagon, a big wagon. My mother packed some things, and we were going to follow the Russians. But at the last minute, she must have prayed. She said, "No. ( she is moved ) If we're going to be killed, we will be killed here." And we stayed. And shortly after that the Russians come in, uh, the Germans come on. Oh, I'm sorry. That's something. I hope you don't mind, but I have to say what it was. When the Germans come in, first few soldiers walked in. No. I should have, yeah. I have to retract a little bit.

SIGRIST: That's quite all right.

LARSEN: Because there was so many wounded they brought to my mother's. You know, when the Russians were retreating and Germans were coming, there were so many men killed. And some, so many men were wounded, I remember without arms, without legs. There was no doctors, no nurses. My mother gave her water, did some of the things she could for them. But they were lying all over the place, and we heard them, it only took years for me to get those screaming, and seeing those people lying there. They buried some around our place. After the war they took them. After a while. But, anyway, when the Russians come in, I remember the first thing. They wanted food from us. My mother said, "We don't have any. We're hungry ourselves." And he didn't believe it. He was one of those. I never forget. He grabbed my mother this way, by her clothes. She was a small woman. She was even smaller than I am. He threw her against the wall. My mother said, "You can kill me, but I don't have it." Somehow other soldiers come in and stopped him. I don't remember the details after that. But that was the worst part to go through, when those men were lying there without anybody taking care of them. At least now I shudder when they talk about war. But at least

maybe, maybe the wounded are better taken care of.

(tape is damaged) I tried so hard to forget it. They have a picture. (tape is damaged)

SIGRIST: War right in your lap. (tape is damaged)

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Well, of course, you were in the peculiar situation of having this war right in your lap.

LARSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: It was right there.

LARSEN: And, you know children. Somehow they have a picture memory, I think, because I never quite forgot. I tried so hard to forget it, but you can't. So it's . . .

SIGRIST: It's a great trauma. I mean, that's why you remember it so clearly.

LARSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: It's a horrible situation.

LARSEN: And believe it or not, I'm still paying with my health

for it. Because there wasn't much to eat. There wasn't much food. We had to go and pick berries till my mother cooked all kinds of different, with that kind they went over. You know, the worst of it, it took a few months.

SIGRIST: Did things get better for you when the war was over?

LARSEN: Well, we had to start all over again. My mother had to start all over. Of course, as far as better, we were better off before the war came, because we were already established. Otherwise they took all the cattle we had, the birds. And I think we saved, my brother saved the horse, if I remember correctly. Otherwise they had to kind of start all over again. So we all had to pitch in and work again as hard as we could. But there was a period before you raise anything on the farm, we had no money saved up because how do you save it. My mother used to sell eggs before. And we had a, she had a cherry, like a little orchid, orchard with cherries, and we used to pick cherries when they were ripe and sell them so we could buy butter, sugar, coffee, whatever, salt. Whatever she needed. But that, that was that kind of living. But we were very happy before the war. At least, you

know, it was beautiful. We had a lot of birds. We had, we used to love haying, you know, for the cattle. And, so that was fine. But it took something out of our health too much, out of my sisters, myself. Somehow my brother survived a little better than we did. And we used to, she used to, it must have saved somewhere, I don't know where, some wheat, not wheat, rye seeds. He used to grind them between the two stones, and my mother would cook it, and we would eat that for quite a long time. Then, of course, in spring we got berries, we got mushrooms, we got different things, and we somehow survived, but you don't survive healthy. That leaves a mark, left a mark on my sister and me. We both had TB. We got over that slowly. And mine even come back when I came back in here.

SIGRIST: So you came to this country in 1926.

LARSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Why did you want to come?

LARSEN: Because I had two sisters in here, and one of my sisters lived in New Britain. The doctor, he was practicing there, her husband. The one that, he got

educated. ( she laughs ) And he was in Holyoke first, Massachusetts. And she was here, and they had a kind of big home, and his office and his waiting room was right at home. And she had too much to do. So we used to write back and forth to her. She used to help us after the war a little bit.

SIGRIST: What did you know about America? I mean, you knew you were born in America.

LARSEN: That's right.

SIGRIST: But what else did you know about America?

LARSEN: Uh, for some reason we knew quite a bit about Chicago. I don't know why Chicago, because they had gangsters. Why did they advertise that, I don't know. But see, Paul, we could not read anything because there was no schools, and the Russians would not let us study. My brother was teaching us a little bit, the little he knew to read Polish. But when somebody was coming we had to hide the books. So first time I went to school I was twelve years old. And not knowing much of anything, well, of course I started with the first grade, and then after three months I jumped to third, because there was no, they had little schools there.

There was no room for the other children. So we were jumping. Whoever made pretty good jumped. But you don't have the foundation, see? Well, somehow. And then we went to school, my sister and I went to school. She loved school, she always said. But my mother started to fail with her health, so I stayed out of school quite a bit to help her, because we felt sorry that she had to do so much and go through so much. So I just stayed much more out of school. I missed school much more than she did. And she was older, so we felt, well, maybe I can catch up somehow.

And when I got to be, I don't know how old now, my sister kept on writing. She says, "Why don't you come back to United States? At least," she says, "you can be with me for a while, you can help me for a while. And after, maybe you can find a job here." So finally we decided that I will go to United States.

SIGRIST: How did your mother feel about that?

LARSEN: Very badly. She was failing a little bit. And she hated to see us, she worked so hard to save us. I don't really know exactly. She tried to tell me to write to her. I remember that. She cried quite a bit, but not too much. She wasn't the crying type.

She held everything inside. And she says, "Promise me that you will take me to United States if I can't stay here any longer." Because, by that time my brother was married and he lived with my mother and his wife.

So they were running the farm, which was good, so she didn't have to do it. And he had a boy already, one boy, when I was leaving. So she had one grandchild that would help. And my sister stayed there yet, but I was told after that when I went she passed out for quite a while. So it was hard to her.

( she is moved )

SIGRIST: Did your sister send you passage?

LARSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And what . . .

LARSEN: She's the one that send me the passage, because first time they came they went on the third class. And she says, "Oh, I can't let you do that." So she was, she send me a second class, on American Line. And the boat was America, I remember that. ( she laughs )  
So, it was easier for me that way.

SIGRIST: What did you take with you?

LARSEN: Not very much. A few dresses that I, I had a friend that could sew very well and, so she made me two or three dresses. They were, not too much clothes, because we didn't have that kind of clothes for going out. When we had, in summer, I remember nice, one good dress, so we, you know, we had two little better ones. So we washed one and pressed it so we'd have one ready, and I had the other one. But, of course, around the farm we wore regular, you know, older clothes. When it comes to shoes, ( she laughs ) like you were asking my husband, well, I, we had shoes, supposed to be for five years. But, you know, you can't, because I had to keep my toes closed so I could get into the shoes. So that wasn't so funny. but, as I said, and we survived. So . . .

SIGRIST: What season of the year did you leave? What month was it?

LARSEN: Did I came here again?

SIGRIST: When did you leave Poland, what time of the year?

LARSEN: I got here just the day before Christmas.

SIGRIST: So it's early winter that you're leaving.

LARSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where, what port did you leave from?

LARSEN: Uh, Germany, Hamburg, I think.

SIGRIST: How did you get from Poland to Hamburg?

LARSEN: By train. I went to Warsaw. And then from Warsaw I can't tell you to where, because my sister took care of everything. We went by the, ( she pauses ) I don't know whether it was train. I know there was no buses at that time. It must have been train. Yeah, it must have been the train. And we got to the, to the German, and got on the American boat.

SIGRIST: Did your mother travel with you to Hamburg?

LARSEN: No, no, no.

SIGRIST: Did anyone travel with you?

LARSEN: No.

SIGRIST: So you're traveling by yourself.

LARSEN: Uh-huh. That's why my sister tried to arrange as much as she could from this side, but I had no problems.

SIGRIST: What is this like for a girl who's grown up on a farm in rural Poland to suddenly have to be responsible and go to Warsaw and go to Hamburg and make the connections, and . . . ?

LARSEN: Well, it's funny, you know, the agency, they had everything pretty well arranged, because I had no trouble. They came and they told us where we're supposed to go. Then there was Polish interpreters to talk Polish, some in German. I didn't understand German, so. And we knew where to go. Well, you feel very uneasy, you know. A girl at that age, I was about, I don't know exactly what age I was, but I hadn't been traveling before that.

SIGRIST: Had you ever been on a train before that?

LARSEN: Oh, yes, on a train, we were. Because we used to go from school for hiking. Not hiking, not walking, but we went to certain places with school, so I was on a train quite a few times. And then we went to Toron [ph]. That was on a, on a line, the border of Germany, the part of Poland that was bordering Germany, so we went on a train once but that was with school afterwards, so that was good.

SIGRIST: Did you have to stay overnight in Hamburg?

LARSEN: No, I don't think so. I don't think we did. I think we sailed.

SIGRIST: You keep saying "we," but you said you were traveling alone.

LARSEN: I was traveling alone, but there was a group of people, that's what I mean "we." As far as I was concerned, I was alone. But you talk to other people, you meet other people. People are pretty nice. The hardest part was to pick out your food, ( she laughs ) when it was everything in English on the boat. That boat was very nice. I enjoyed it. I sat on the deck a lot in the sun. That was fun because I loved that.

SIGRIST: And what class are you traveling on the boat?

LARSEN: Second.

SIGRIST: Second class. This is on the America, you said, the name of the boat.

LARSEN: Yeah. They had three classes, first, second and third. Because I couldn't go on the first class, but

I could go down and see how they were doing downstairs, but the third class could not come up to second class. You see, that was all kind of segregated.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick?

LARSEN: Yes, seasick.

SIGRIST: Tell me about that.

LARSEN: That was very, very hard. We were, the first time it started we were in the dining room, and we had food on our plates, and this big wave or whatever it was come in and threw everything on the floor. All the food, all the dishes all broke. ( she laughs ) And, of course, we got some more food later if you felt like eating after that, but it, we did a lot of throwing up.

SIGRIST: How long did the voyage last?

LARSEN: The voyage? I think it was five days.

SIGRIST: And did you come into the port of New York?

LARSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

LARSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about that, please?

LARSEN: Well, I have to say that I was very limited on knowing what the liberty statue meant. It was this huge and, to me it was a very big statue, but I didn't know what it really meant at that time, because my mother never said, never said anything. It was tragic because I never saw my father with, you know, the pictures were very rare at that time, taking pictures, and expensive. So I never knew how my father looked, and my brother that was killed neither. And that's what bothered me for the longest time the most. But we landed in New York. My sister was waiting for me.

SIGRIST: Right, because you wouldn't have to go to Ellis because you came second class.

LARSEN: No, no.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what kind of processing did they do to you on the boat? Did you have to undergo any kind of examination on the boat before you were released?

LARSEN: No, no. I had the shots in Poland at that time, and so I didn't have to go through anything. It was just clear. When she came, I didn't know her and she didn't know me, only from pictures. She came with her friend. ( she laughs ) He was very nice. And she just, she waved. When she saw me, she waved. She didn't know whether it was me or not, and when she waved, looking at me, then I waved back. And we kind of, then we went, then they let us go down. We went down and, of course, we met. It was cold, because I remember she had her fur coat on, and I had a coat, I had a coat on. And her and her friend, and we went out and had a supper in New York in a restaurant. That was the first big supper in America. And he wanted to take me for a walk in New York, because we stayed overnight in New York. And when we went he took me on, I don't know where we stayed, what hotel, at that time, or anything. And that was exciting for me.

SIGRIST: What did New York look like to a young lady from Poland?

LARSEN: A lot of lights. You have to realize one thing, that we didn't have electricity in my mother's home at that

time. Later on they got it, I understand. But at that time we only had lamps, and we had to do everything by kerosene lamps, which is not very good for the eyes neither. ( she laughs ) So when I saw all the lights in New York, it was really exciting. It was very impressive to me. And I thought, "Oh, this is really something unusual." Of course, in Warsaw, they had a lot of lights, too.

SIGRIST: Sure, in Warsaw.

LARSEN: But it's not New York. It's different.

SIGRIST: And you stayed overnight in New York. And then did you go to, was it New Haven? Was that, not New Haven, where, New Britain?

LARSEN: Well, yeah. Well, we took a train to New Britain from New York.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about the things that struck you as being different in America that first year that you were here.

LARSEN: Everything was different. The way that people lived, the way that people talked, the way that people behaved. And what struck me the most is how the

children behaved towards their teachers. Because we were walking with my sister on the street, and her daughter was small, walking with us, and she waved to another lady. I didn't know, but I asked afterwards.

She just waved, "Hi!" And I asked my sister, "Why, who was that?" And she said, "Oh, that's one of her teachers." We would have never dared to do that in Poland. We had a lot of respect in Poland for older people, a lot of respect for teachers, for doctors, later on, that I, in Skempy, the city, there were some doctors and lawyers. Even in drugstores. They had drugstores that was only medicine, nothing else. It was kind of very majestic, too. You walked in there, you behaved. The drug stores that impressed me in this country, at the beginning, they had everything there, and I couldn't believe it. There's such a contrast what we had in Poland drugstores. And then the freedom, either freedom or disrespect. I didn't know what to call it, for the profession, for the older people. Oh, that stayed with me for quite a while. I couldn't get used to that, because we weren't used to it.

SIGRIST: How did you learn English?

LARSEN: Talking. By trying to read, my sister used to help me. I went, I think, for two or three months to evening school, but that's, that wasn't too . . .

SIGRIST: What was that like? Can you describe night school for me? What that experience, what did that entail?

LARSEN: Well, they tried to teach us from the very beginning just the very delicate words, you know, small words, so we would remember how to put them together. It wasn't grammar or anything. That's why we talked the way we do, Paul, because if you don't learn the language, basic language, I don't care which one it is, from the beginning, you will not talk properly because you can't. You don't know the grammar, you don't know. You just learn what you pick up.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a story, perhaps where you made a mistake or you said the wrong word?

LARSEN: Oh, yes, I sure do. I don't know whether I should repeat this here.

SIGRIST: I'd like you to, if you'd like to.

LARSEN: ( she laughs ) We were playing cards, and believe me, there was quite a, there were two doctors and there

were two priests and, you know, for fun at home. And I said, someone said, "Celina, you didn't put the card down." I said, "Oh, yes, I put ass on." And they burst out laughing. You know, instead of saying, "ace" But, that meant nothing to me. I just remembered something about it. ( she laughs ) They were laughing for the longest time. I finally started to laugh myself, and I said, "Well, that's, you shouldn't force me to do this." ( she laughs ) But that was the one thing that stayed with me forever.

SIGRIST: At least you were among friends, you know.

LARSEN: Oh, yeah. It was among friends.

SIGRIST: Did you miss Poland?

LARSEN: Oh, the first two years I did. I missed Poland for the, for different things. I wouldn't want to go back. That, I didn't want, Paul, because I know which we went through, and what it would me again if I went back. That I didn't want. But I missed different living, you know. It takes time to get used to this type of living. But it took me about two years before I felt a little bit more at home, that I was American before I started to. And I said, "This is my country.

I was born here. So I got to get used to it, I got to love it." And that's the way it was.

SIGRIST: It's interesting, of course, that you were American-born.

LARSEN: Yeah. And . . .

SIGRIST: And America was so foreign to you.

LARSEN: So I did a lot of different works after that. I was telling you the priest that was in West Virginia. Now when I came here she was in Housatonic. No, she was South Deerfield, Massachusetts. And then he moved to Housatonic, not far from Great Barrington. You know Great Barrington? It's such a beautiful town, Stockbridge. And I taught Polish. I knew Polish a little more than they did here, so I wasn't qualified, but after school I was teaching the kids in church Polish for a few years, and then in Pittsfield again.

SIGRIST: Did he ever tell you the story about finding you as a little baby?

LARSEN: Oh, yes, I know from him, because I wouldn't know again, I wouldn't know.

SIGRIST: He had told you that, or if your mother had told you that.

LARSEN: Yeah, yeah. No, my mother didn't even know. Of course, my mother, he said she didn't come back for a few hours. She forgot about me completely.

SIGRIST: Did you ever see your mother again after you came to this country?

LARSEN: No, no. I used to write, my brother used to write quite a bit. But I knew she was pretty happy with his children. So I helped her a little. Financially, for a little luxuries. I wish I could have helped her more, but it was always, but she did. She was happy with the grandchildren.

SIGRIST: Her life was there.

LARSEN: Yeah, her life was there. She, of course, she missed us, oh, my brother said she missed. And then the letter, I got my sister, my older sister.

SIGRIST: She came over.

LARSEN: She came over here. But she went to Canada to teach Polish, since she finished school a little more than I

did. So she was, and she died there. She got married, and she died.

SIGRIST: Are you glad you came to America?

LARSEN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I am very happy. And especially from the time we've been married, it was a very good life for me.

SIGRIST: What year did you get married?

LARSEN: '35, 1935.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me very quickly how you met Mr. Larsen.

LARSEN: Oh, yes. I was working in Hartford, and I had this friend, nurse, and I said to her, "Gee, I haven't been in New Britain to see my sister for a long time. I wish I could go in the evening sometime." "Oh," she says, "I know somebody that will take us." She was a nurse for my husband's boss.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah.

LARSEN: So she called Knud, and he came with his car. At that time, he already had a nice car at that time. And he took us to New Britain. And we said we had a very nice evening there. And from then on he kept on

calling and we went out, and send flowers. And that's how it started.

SIGRIST: Well, we have to end now, but I want to thank you very much. It was an unexpected pleasure to be able to interview you, also.

LARSEN: Thank you.

SIGRIST: Your story is very dramatic.

LARSEN: The childhood was dramatic, but the end. But, as I said, that's why I treasure my husband, because he saved my life. I was sick with TB here, I was sick with other things. ( she is moved ) But somehow we made it.

SIGRIST: You had a happy ending. Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Larsen.

LARSEN: Oh, thank you.

MR. LARSEN: Thank you.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Celina Larsen on Monday, March 29th in Newington, Connecticut.