

**EI-324**

**KATHERINE DONATH TIMAR ADLER**

**BIRTH DATE: MARCH 12, 1915**

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

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 3/1994**

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

**HUNGARY, 1948**

**BORN: BUDAPEST**

**AGE AT IMMIGRATION: 33**

**PORT OF EMBARKATION: LE HAVRE**

**PASSAGE ON: NORMANDIE**

**RESIDENCES: BUDAPEST**

**US: NYC, WEST SIDE**

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Saturday, May 22, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Katherine Adler. Mrs. Adler came from Hungary in 1948 when she was thirty-four years old and ended up detained at Ellis Island.

ADLER: Thirty-three.

SIGRIST: You were thirty-three years old, excuse me. Anyway, good afternoon. And can we begin by giving me your birth date.

ADLER: It was March 12, 1915.

SIGRIST: And your maiden name, please?

ADLER: Katherine Donath, D-O-N-A-T-H.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

ADLER: I was born in Budapest.

SIGRIST: Well let's pick up your story where you would like to pick it up for us.

ADLER: Well, I just think what's interesting, the reason I'm here, is how it started. After the war, after the war I was working for the American State Department in Budapest, Hungary. American State Department, I was employed by the American State Department. And at a certain point in 1947, 1947 I wanted to come to visit for, I was employed, I was working, and I wanted to come for a visit to the United States for a two weeks' stay. Now, at that time my sister and my brother-in-law, who was American, were stationing in Paris. Is it okay? ( referring to microphone ) Were stationing in Paris, and they actually invited me to come with them to the United States. But you have to get your visa overnight to come right away because the time is

short, get the visa. So here I was, I had a passport, but I had no American visa. As you know, to get an American visa you have to have an affidavit. There was no time for an affidavit. So I went to see the consul of that time. I don't even know his name. And I told him that story. "Look, I have an opportunity now to visit the United States, take a two weeks' vacation, help me." And he was very nice. He said, "Okay, I'll help you. I mean, I know you." And he put the visa, without an affidavit, in my passport. I don't blame him for that, because he knew me, but there was no time. So I left Budapest in 1947 and I went to Paris.

SIGRIST: Okay. Before you get out of Budapest, may I ask how you got the job working in Budapest?

ADLER: Well, that goes backwards then. ( she laughs )  
During the war I was working for the Swiss delegation. Fortunately I speak many languages, and that's what helped me through my life. And since I was working, speaking all these languages, I was employed by the Swiss State Department during the war who represented all the Allies. You know the story. And the Swiss government represented the United States. And when

the war was over and the Swiss didn't do this work any more and the Americans came to, and the American State Department took me over, actually, from the Swiss.

SIGRIST: Because you have that facility.

ADLER: No, because I was working in the same building, and when the Swiss left the Americans came in. So I had the job. And I had a two weeks' vacation. That's where I continue, right.

SIGRIST: May I ask what you did for them, for the State Department?

ADLER: I was a file clerk.

SIGRIST: Were there other Americans working in the building, or were there mostly Europeans?

ADLER: Yes. No, no, there were Americans who were sent over to Budapest by the State Department. There were also Hungarians who were, the same way as I did, that were working during the war for the Swiss, and then the American State Department took them over.

SIGRIST: I see. Were you married at that time?

ADLER: Well, I was a widow already. I lost my first husband

during the Holocaust. He was deported and never came back. Actually, I didn't come to this country as Donath, like I gave to you, my maiden name. I came to this country with the name of Timar, T-I-M-A-R.

SIGRIST: Which would have been your husband's . . .

ADLER: My first husband's name, uh-huh.

SIGRIST: All right. Well, so you went to Paris.

ADLER: So I went to Paris to meet my sister and my brother-in-law. And by the time I got there they said, "Oh, no. Our plans were changed. We are not going to the American, America." And I myself, I had no money to go just by myself, so I did not go in '47. I didn't come to the United States in 1947. And after my two weeks' vacation in Paris, I went back to Hungary, continue my work. And in 1948, since I still had that visa I got, it was valid for one year for a two weeks' stay in the United States. Now, that visa was still valid. And I said, "I'm going to go now." And I came in '48.

SIGRIST: Were you disappointed the first time when you couldn't come?

ADLER: Oh, yes, of course. It was great because it was very exciting, you know. That would have been the first time. And my sister lived always, not always, but before the war she was already married to an American citizen and lived in the United States. So in 1948 I came to this country with that visa, which was still valid, the year was not over, for a two weeks' stay. And I arrived to Ellis Island, here's my point, and they didn't accept my visa because I had no affidavit.

SIGRIST: What boat did you take to America?

ADLER: Uh, to America was the, it doesn't exist any more, the Normandie.

SIGRIST: And where did you leave from?

ADLER: From Le Havre.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about the Normandie? Can you describe it for me?

ADLER: Oh, it was a beautiful, it doesn't exist any more. It was a beautiful French boat, beautiful food. I don't remember too much more, but it was a beautiful boat.

SIGRIST: Can you describe your cabin?

ADLER: No, I don't quite remember any more. It was tourist class, but it was a six day trip. But I don't remember too much about the boat. I remember that it was very lovely and I was very excited to come to the United States, and here I arrived, yes.

SIGRIST: Did you bring anything with you to, like a reminder of Hungary or your old life? Was there something that you took with you that's very precious?

ADLER: No, that time I didn't know that I am not going to go back to Hungary. As a matter of fact my parents, in 1948, lived in Hungary. And I was already, I was in Paris, to come to the United States I got a letter from my father, may his soul rest in peace, "Don't come back. The Communists are taking over." Now, I was in Paris at that time with only summer clothes. And my father, he was really right. He said, "Don't come back." And I didn't go back, ever. So I was there with summer clothes, and that's another story. I don't think how I made my life in France, because I made my life in France.

SIGRIST: And how long were you in France before you left? Was it a year?

ADLER: No, no. Let me see, no. Just, just a few weeks, and then I came to this country, and then I went back to France. I didn't stay here for long. I stayed for a short while.

SIGRIST: When you were in Paris, was that the first time you had been in Paris.

ADLER: Oh, no, no. I went to college in France. It was before the war.

SIGRIST: I see.

ADLER: Oh, no, no. And then I worked in France.

SIGRIST: There was a story about the summer clothes you were going to tell.

ADLER: No, the summer clothes, I went with summer clothes for a vacation, from Budapest to Paris, summer clothes, in order to come to the United States, and that, it was just at this time when the Communists took over in Hungary. And my father had the foresight, the wonderful foresight, to tell me, "Try not to come back. Go west." And then, uh . . .

SIGRIST: So tell me what happened when the boat docked in New

York.

ADLER: Well, that's what it is. The boat docked around six o'clock in the evening in New York. And suddenly the officers here took me and said, "No, you can't stay here, you have no affidavit." There was something wrong. So I myself, I was scared to death. There were three other, two other women who had similar visa problems and one criminal. That I knew, I mean, we knew he was a criminal, a man. And when I heard Ellis Island, I almost fainted because in Europe at that time the reputation of Ellis Island was, I think I wrote that down for you, didn't I?

SIGRIST: That's okay. Say it on tape, please.

ADLER: You want me to say it?

SIGRIST: Yes, please.

ADLER: All right. So it was so terrible, the reputation of Ellis Island, that it's a dungeon and that they beat people up, and it was just the horror even to hear about it. So here I arrive. I was relatively young. Not that young, but relatively young, alone on Ellis Island. If they take me, what they going to do with

me? And I was scared to death. And the two other ladies also were all scared to death. So we arrived here to this island, and immediately they took three of us who had this minor, not criminal problem but a minor problem, took us one side and the criminal took in the other side, whom we never saw again. And three of us ladies, we were taken, a matron came.

( she laughs ) I remember the matron in a white robe and a big bunch of keys on her side, and I was trembling. I didn't see the other ladies any more. I only can talk about myself. And this matron suddenly said that, "Are you hungry?" I said, "Yes, I am." "Okay. We are going, the cafeteria is closed, but we are going to open it for you." I myself said, "This is Ellis Island? They are so nice to me?" They opened the cafeteria. "Eat whatever you want." They gave us a beautiful spread. And after that, go to sleep. So they let me make a phone call, so I made the phone call to a friend of mine. I had no money myself. I came with eighty dollars in my pocket. And the government immigration office, asked a thousand dollars as a bail, which I didn't have. They would have shipped me back. So I called up a friend of mine. The friend of mine I met in Budapest. She was

an American girl who worked for the American Military Mission in Hungary. And I had her phone number, and I called her up here already in New York. And I told her my story, "I'm here, I had wanted the money, please help." So she said, "Okay. Tomorrow morning I will be there." So let me go back now to that evening. So the matron comes and, you see, as I'm talking I see the whole situation in front of me. And she guided me to a room where there were other women also sleeping, to a bed. And she lifted up the cover of the bed and she looked at the sheet and she said, "That's not clean enough for you." I mean, I couldn't tell you, I was so impressed after all these horror stories I heard. So they changed the sheet of the bed. "Would you like to have a shower? We have hot water." They gave me a bathroom. I went there to have a shower. It was unbelievable. So I had a night's sleep and the next morning, breakfast, here was the breakfast. There was a big, big hall. I don't know. Do you still have that, a big hall where all the immigrants were able to buy everything?

SIGRIST: There were several dining rooms actually it could have been.

ADLER: Well, that was one big hall, I remember, where I had breakfast. And naturally I was waiting for that friend to bail me out, and she was smart because she had her I.D.'s that she was working for the military mission, and I had my I.D.'s that I worked for the American State Department, so they reduced my bail for five hundred. So this friend of mine, I'm still very grateful to her, paid out the five hundred dollars and I was able to leave. She was paid back naturally, afterwards.

SIGRIST: ( referring to microphone ) You might not want to touch this because it will pick up your fingernails. Okay, go ahead.

ADLER: That's it. That's about Ellis Island. And a few days after, since I was so very much impressed how they treated me here, that I wrote a letter, and that was the letter I asked you do you still have it. I wrote a letter to the governor telling him and thanking him and that beautiful treatment I had and how much different it was from what I expected. And I wonder whether you still have that letter. It was, of course, signed Katherine Timare.

SIGRIST: Well, as I said to you on the phone, all records in 1954 were removed from Ellis Island, so we have nothing here.

ADLER: That's all I can tell you about Ellis Island. And then two years ago when you opened and remodeled everything I came here with my daughter and I was looking for the room where I was. I couldn't find it.

SIGRIST: You were in a room by yourself.

ADLER: No. It was a big room, you know, it's such a long time ago. It was a big room, and certain things you remember. I remember the bed, that the matron wanted to change the sheets. I remember another bed where probably a girl from Slavic country was sleeping. The reason I say this, from Slavic country, was because she has those boots, what the Eastern European people wear, peasants wear, and that boot was sticking out from under the cover. These little things you remember.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about the inside of where you were fed? Do you remember what it looked like on the inside?

ADLER: No. It was a cafeteria, a cafeteria. I think, just like today. And they, my memory is so real. There were benches, long benches, long tables. But I know the food was good, and they opened it specially for us.

SIGRIST: What time of the year is this?

ADLER: ( she sighs ) Oh, that, just let me, that was in February.

SIGRIST: And you're here with your summer clothes.

ADLER: No, no, no. That's, you're right, you caught me now. I left Hungary in, no, that was, that was in June, that was in June. That was in June.

SIGRIST: When you were here at Ellis was in June.

ADLER: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: So your summer clothes were all right. ( he laughs )

ADLER: And then I went back.

SIGRIST: Well, how long were you here?

ADLER: No, no, no. That was '48. And then I went back to

France again, was working, and came back here in '49, December '49. I was okay with my visa at that time. I came back to the United States in 1949, got married in eight days. Because in '48 I met my husband, Mr. Adler.

SIGRIST: Here in America?

ADLER: Here in America. And I, we didn't get married at that time. I went back to Europe and in '49 I came back here and that's when we got married.

SIGRIST: How long were you in New York before you went back to France?

ADLER: At that time I, it was three months. I extended my visa for three months. I was here for three months.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about . . .

ADLER: It was a funny story. That funny story, also. Yes?

SIGRIST: Well, tell us.

ADLER: Well, this story, you see, when I was in France, and I didn't go back to Hungary, it's long. How shall I explain? I was working, I was working. I was bilingual, you know. I spoke English well at that

time already, English and French, and I got a job with Texas Oil Company French Refinery as a file supervisor. Since I had my credits from the American State Department, I easily got a job as a file supervisor with Texas Oil Company, a beautiful job I had. And I wanted to come to America for a visit at that time, and then asked for a, I mean, I was entitled for a two weeks' vacation. That's when I came, in '48. And I stayed here for three months, I liked it so much. In the mean time, I lost my job in Paris, I lost it. It was a beautiful job but, of course, they didn't wait for me. And then I was struggling in France. It was bad years in Depression and everything in France. So I came back, and I made my life here. And I had two beautiful children and a grandchild. My children are born here, American citizens.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me about when you were here for the first three months, can you tell me some of the things that you liked about America, some things that struck you?

ADLER: Everything. I was home.

SIGRIST: What was different?

ADLER: No! I can't explain it to you. I didn't have those feelings like most of the immigrants have, I must say.

They don't find their place, they don't speak their language. I knew American people, and I liked American people already in Europe. So when I, when I came here I, somehow I was home right away. I never had the feeling that I'm not home. But I, I have an interesting story, if you want to hear the story about the five hundred dollars. Would you like to hear it?

So, this friend of mine paid the five hundred. We're going backwards now. This friend of mine paid the five hundred dollars. Of course, she's entitled to get it back. I myself, I didn't have the money. When I got married to Mr. Adler, who was a lawyer, and a prominent lawyer . . .

SIGRIST: And this is the second time.

ADLER: This is the second time. The first one, unfortunately, I lost already.

SIGRIST: No, I meant the second, this is the second time you're in America.

ADLER: Oh, the second time, yeah. I got married in 1950.

SIGRIST: Right.

ADLER: In 1950, only. After '48 I went back to France in '49, when I lost my job, I was struggling, and I come back. And then I got married to Mr. Adler, whom I knew already, but it was a very fast marriage because we had to, otherwise I couldn't have stayed here. And it was a beautiful marriage. I had a beautiful life with him. Unfortunately I lost him six years ago. Don't let me jump from one subject, but this might be interesting for you. So here was this question of the five hundred dollars, and this five hundred dollars they're supposed to give me back after I become a citizen. So I got married to Mr. Adler and the immigration law is such that you have to, if you are with a visitor visa here and you marry an American citizen, you have to leave the country and come back. You know that law? All right. That was the law. I don't know how it is now, but that was the law at that time. So, I couldn't. I got pregnant, and I had a very difficult pregnancy in the sense that the last three months I had to stay in bed, if you don't want to lose the child, which I really wanted to have. And the doctor didn't permit me to travel, not even to sit

in a car, nothing, just keep quiet, until the last months. So when I was supposed to leave the country, I couldn't leave the country. But I left the country as I said, pregnant in the last month, I came back and became an American citizen. So my husband, who was a lawyer, asked for the five hundred dollars. They didn't want to give it back to him. They said, "You didn't leave the country when you were supposed to. You don't get the money back." Now my husband, who was an excellent lawyer, it was not so much for the five hundred dollars, but for the principle. Now, here I have a, not a sick woman, but a woman who is pregnant, is going to have American children, cannot leave, which is justified by doctors, cannot move, and you don't give back the five hundred dollars? So he started to fight. He started to fight and sue the American government, and me, too. I went with him, because I was interested, to Albany, at least ten times. It cost him more, ten times more than five hundred dollars because by principle he wanted to get it back. Finally, after about five, six years, they said, "Okay, you're right." And he won, he won the lawsuit, that you get the five hundred dollars back. That's what he wanted. And he made a precedent out of

it, an American law, that a woman who because, my story, expecting a child and cannot move, they shouldn't withhold the citizenship or whatever bail there is. And you know something? Yesterday I was looking for that, because it's a law. I can't find it. I mean, I just can't find it. It must be somewhere, but I can't find it. So, anyway, he won the suit and he got a letter that, "You won the suit."

And the money was sent to the Treasury. Now you have to get the money back from the Treasury. At that point my husband gave it up. He said, "I had enough."

I wanted to win the suit because I'm right. I wanted to make a precedent of the law." What he did. The five hundred we never got back. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Now, you have a sister in America.

ADLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Now, did you . . .

ADLER: I don't want to speak about my sister. I'm sorry.

SIGRIST: Okay. I actually wasn't going to ask you about her.

ADLER: What is it?

SIGRIST: I was going to say, did you try to bring any of your other family to America?

ADLER: Oh, yes, yes, yes, my parents. I brought my parents here.

SIGRIST: What year was that?

ADLER: My parents came exactly the month when my son was born, and that was in 1951. They came here and my mother lived fifteen years. She adjusted herself very well. They went to school here to learn English. My mother learned English. My father couldn't. My father was rather unhappy. He just, he was a certain age and he couldn't adjust himself. My mother was happy because she had the grandchildren. I had the second one a year after. She was happy. She adjusted herself.

SIGRIST: Did your father actually want to return to Hungary?

ADLER: Yes, yes, because he just couldn't find his place here. He didn't learn the language.

SIGRIST: Well, of course, how old was he when he came? He must have been . . .

ADLER: Uh, he was . . .

SIGRIST: Fifties or sixties?

ADLER: Sixty-five.

SIGRIST: Sixty-five.

ADLER: Sixty-four, sixty-five. And he died before he was seventy. And I have the feeling maybe he never wanted to live. He was very unhappy, very unhappy, because of the language barrier.

SIGRIST: Were there, of course there was a whole community of Europeans that had come . . .

ADLER: Hungarians, yes. Yeah, well, he did, what my father did, I mean, first of all, I don't know whether to say this, he was cheated. This was a terrible thing. When he left, my father was a businessman, and he was in business, he was in the leather business, L-E-A-T-H-E-R business. And he had a business with a lifelong friend in Hungary, business together. And when he wanted to leave Hungary he sold his business to that friend for five thousand dollars, which at that time was a nice amount. It's like fifty thousand today. And the agreement was that you couldn't bring out

money from Hungary, that the, but this friend, so-called friend, had a daughter in Belgium. And the agreement was within them that the five thousand dollars will be sent by the daughter to the United States, because you couldn't bring money, you couldn't have it writed because you couldn't do that, you know, you couldn't leave Hungary with the writing that somebody owes me five thousand dollars, so all this was verbal and trust. So my father was sure that when he gets here to the United States he's going to get his five thousand dollars, but she never did it. They denied it and he never got it. My husband tried to sue them, but there was no basing because there was no real agreement, no writing. So he was very unhappy about it because he depended on me, you know. But actually what he did is he went to the Hungarian circles and he met a person who had a doll factory. And he was so good to him, he engaged my father, because my father was a good businessman. He gave a job for my father with a Hungarian English-speaking secretary. So somehow he was able to function and earn a living.

SIGRIST: But still there was a great bitterness about . . .

ADLER: There was a bitterness, he wanted to go back.

SIGRIST: Yeah. And he didn't like America anyway.

ADLER: No, he couldn't, he couldn't.

SIGRIST: Did they live with you, your parents, when they came here?

ADLER: No, no, no, no, no.

SIGRIST: Were you in New York all this time?

ADLER: Always, New York, West Side.

SIGRIST: And they lived in New York too?

ADLER: Very nearby.

SIGRIST: It's interesting that your mother adapted to it all so much more easily.

ADLER: Yes, yes, yeah. Much more, but she, she was the one. Not only that, my mother worked. She worked till the last minute of her life.

SIGRIST: Tell me about her getting, we have five minutes left.

Tell me about your mother getting a job and how she did that.

ADLER: I got it for her, actually. My mother was very handy in sewing and embroidery, and there was a Hungarian woman who had a workshop where they worked blouses and sweaters. My mother got the job. So the two of them actually were able to find their self-respect, support themselves.

SIGRIST: But your mother didn't want to go back, did she?

ADLER: No. She wanted to stay with the grandchildren.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

ADLER: She was very happy. My mother was a wonderful person. She worked whole day, and after five o'clock she came and helped me with the two little ones. I says, "Mother, you got to rest." No, no, she wanted to help me. She died where she worked. One morning they called us, "You better come, your mother is not feeling well." Two hours after she was gone, a wonderful woman. My father too, but he was very unhappy.

SIGRIST: That's too bad.

ADLER: What else would you like to know?

SIGRIST: Well, I guess my final question for you, and I sort of know the answer, I think, was coming to America the right thing to do?

ADLER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I was here, I was home from the first moment on.

SIGRIST: There was nothing about America that you didn't like?

ADLER: No.

SIGRIST: Something?

ADLER: No, no, no, no. Why would you like to find that?

SIGRIST: Well, sometimes people . . .

ADLER: No. You know, maybe my answer is negative. When I, and you can put this down if you want to. I don't care if anybody hears it. When I left Hungary, oh, no, that was a little bit later I left Hungary. No, that doesn't work. No, I decided I'd never go back, never. After the Nazis, the Communists, I'll never go back.

SIGRIST: You made you life here.

ADLER: I made my life here, and I never went visiting either,

and I have desire whatsoever to go back to Hungary. They didn't treat me well. I am Jewish and already before the Germans took it over I couldn't go to college because being Jewish. There was a numerous clauses. You know what that is? So I had to go to France. I went to college to France. France was good to me, gave me college. I went to law school in France and I worked there. But Hungary no. There was only one thing I can say about Hungary. I went to high school there and I graduated high school there. They gave an excellent education. I mean, excellent.

So much so that when I applied for a teacher's license here, I wanted to get my teacher's license for my graduation, I got the equivalent of two years' college, so much high the . . .

SIGRIST: The standards.

ADLER: The standard of Hungarian education was.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Adler, we need to end now, our time is up. But I want to thank you very much for coming out on a very sunny Saturday afternoon and telling us about your very personal experience about Ellis Island. The cafeteria and the matron . . .

EI-324/ADLER

ADLER: That was great. ( they laugh ) That's the reason I  
wanted to come here and tell you.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Katherine Adler  
on Saturday, May 22, 1993 at the Ellis Island  
Recording Studio.