

EI-363

FANNIE TROST (TROSTANICKI) COLE

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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POLAND, 1928

AGE 5

SIGRIST: Good morning, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service.

Today is Thursday, July 29, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording studio with Fannie Cole. Mrs. Cole came from Poland in 1928 when she was five years and eleven months. Anyway, good morning, Mrs. Cole.

COLE: Good morning.

SIGRIST: Can we begin by giving me your birth date, please?

COLE: June 25, 1922.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me where you were born, please?

COLE: Yes. I was born in Poland, which wasn't too far from the Russian border, actually. A little further information on the town, it

was Russia before World War I, and it was occupied by the Russian people, mostly. But after World War I, when Poland became independent, that part became Poland. And what my parents always said is that they practically imported Polish people for that town, displaced apparently the Russian people who had been living there.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the town?

COLE: Mileiczicz. M-I-L-E-I-C-Z-I-C-Z, something like that. And it was in Grodno Givrne. G-R-O-D-N-O. The largest city, apparently, was Grodno. Givrne I think is spelled G-I-V-R-N-E, and it means province.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what the town looked like a little bit?

COLE: Yes. It was a town like almost from Fiddler On The Roof. A little more sophisticated than Fiddler On The Roof. There is a category in Poland of a shtetl, which Fiddler On The Roof was. I was probably in the shtetl, or even more advanced than that. And then there's a word "dorf," which comes from the German, which means "almost a country." So where I was was a shtetl. Oh, I forgot, I should have written down the population of it in 19, in 1938, I think. I forgot. But it was a small population, yes, for the historical background.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

COLE: Uh, Herschel, Harry.

SIGRIST: And was he from this town?

COLE: I think he, I think he was from the town, and my mother was from another town, another shtetl.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your father and what he did for a living in Europe.

COLE: He was a tailor, he was a tailor.

SIGRIST: Can you elaborate any more on that? Was this a family business?

COLE: You see, I didn't know him, no, no, no. I didn't know him, because he left, he came to Europe after the war, and he had been here once before, though.

SIGRIST: Had been to America after the war.

COLE: I think he came to 19, no, no. He came in 1910 and went back, and I was born. He left when I was about one year old. So I really didn't know him till I came to the United States.

SIGRIST: What do you know about his background, about his family?

COLE: Oh, not too much. Um, my grandfather's name was David. I have the

stone for him. I knew his father and his mother, because I lived with them.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your dad's parents?

COLE: It's hard to say. I remember more of my uncle, who had a little stocking factory right in the house. I should have brought that picture. And they were taking a picture of all of them outside. He must have had about five local women working there. And I, they wouldn't let me in the picture, and I stood in the doorway crying with my mother holding me. This must have been about a year before I came, and I'm in the picture with my mother. In the summer, he had what they called a little, it was a town that had forests, and there were dachas there. I think you're familiar with the word dacha. And he had a little ice cream stand, and I went there. I don't remember who took me, I walked away and I got lost in the forest. And I could always identify with Little Red Riding Hood and the German Grimm's fairy tales. That, and then some people saw me crying, and I told them who my uncle was, and they brought me back to the stand.

SIGRIST: What do you think is your earliest memory?

COLE: It seems to be quite early. Vaguely I remember having all the childhood diseases when I was in Europe, the, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything about that specifically, treatments,
or . . .

COLE: Specifically not, but, um, specifically not. But all I remember, even
carried back to the United States, my mother always said when
someone got an orange in Europe it meant they were practically
dying because it was unheard of. And then they did believe in
witchcraft, just as the other peasants did. They believed in
witches, not witchcraft, I'm sorry. I shouldn't, I used the
wrong word, The Evil Eye, as the other peasants did, and I
understand this is typical of the peasant life almost all over,
yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember . . .

COLE: I remember getting a patch, I believe, on my hand. I don't think it
was in the United States. I think it was in Europe, for scarlet
fever or something. I'm not absolutely sure, but I'm quite sure.

SIGRIST: You would say these were superstitious people, believe in The
Evil Eye.

COLE: Well, it's The Evil Eye that was the really, the superstition, which
seemed to coincide with the other, throughout Europe we have, you
know, I understand among the peasant people The Evil Eye, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any, maybe scary stories or folk tales that were

told to you as a child in Europe?

COLE: No, actually. But I had a funny feeling about God coming down on iron spurs if I just, you know, ate the wrong food or something, the dietary laws. That I remember. And what was I going to say? And there were some stories about, I mean, it's an awful thing to be reporting, but the stories that came down from people, someone who must have had a terrible skin disease. No one in my family. This was brought down. And nothing could cure it except feces.

SIGRIST: And you remember people talking about that.

COLE: I remember my mother saying that, even in the, and, of course, for sore throats they used urine, you know.

SIGRIST: So this is a rather primitive place.

COLE: Yeah. And you, the one they depended on was the felcher, the pharmacist.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any folk songs?

COLE: Songs, no. But I do have memory images of May festivals, I think, where the little girls had flowers in their hair, and I remember flowers in the fields. I remember women doing washes in the brook.

SIGRIST: Well, how did they do that? Describe how they would do laundry?

COLE: Well, the way you see it, and if you pass, go through Mexico or any of these countries . . .

SIGRIST: You can just describe it for me.

COLE: They did it in the brook. I know, you can't see my hands over the (?). They just washed it in their hands. I don't even know if they used scrub boards. I do not remember.

SIGRIST: And this was primarily women's work.

COLE: Yeah. Oh, yes, oh, yes. And then I remember when they baked matzos for the Jewish holidays that they also did it nearby. I don't think they used the brook, as far as I know. Plus we had no plumbing.

SIGRIST: Can you describe your house for me?

COLE: Yes. It was a wooden, a little wooden house, a modest little place similar to what you'd seen in the pictures in that movie, land of hope, or, you know. I just saw it downstairs, similar.

SIGRIST: How did you heat your house?

COLE: You know, I don't remember that. I don't even remember a fireplace. But all I know is that we had no electricity, no plumbing.

SIGRIST: Did you keep animals?

COLE: No.

SIGRIST: Did you have a garden?

COLE: That is a funny thing. We had a little garden in the front, and one day I cleaned it up. I cleaned up all, and I must have put the dirt in the little thing. I was so proud of myself for having cleaned up. A policeman came along and we were fined because we had left some of that out. So there was the fear of the policemen, yeah, of authority. But I, oh, I'm sorry, before I forget, speaking of, a schoolteacher passed by our house, and I must have been five years old, and I started to cry because I wanted to go to school. I was still too young. So I never started school, and I never knew Polish. Had I lived in a big city and started school I probably would have known a bit of Polish.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit, I assume you spoke Yiddish at home.

COLE: Oh, yes, yes, my first language.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about what you remember about your religious life at that time?

COLE: I remember going to synagogue. I remember dressing up for the holidays. And, of course, we had no ready-made clothing. And

since I, we did get funds from my father in the United States, we were considered the Americans almost, Americanskis, as we were called. So we were a little better off than some of the other people. I do remember a little girl, I must have been about five years old, going to Argentina. I tried to, every time I meet an Argentine Jew I ask if they know this name. I knew some of the first names. I haven't been able to make a contact, though.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. So America wasn't the only place people were going.

COLE: No. This little girl went to Argentina, yes. That's about all I know. But this happened about a year before I left, yes.

SIGRIST: Talk about how you practiced your religion at home.

COLE: Oh, it was an orthodox, you know. Never had the non-Kosher meats or anything like that. We observed the Sabbath. And I remember going on the holidays, getting all dressed up, yeah.

SIGRIST: Is there a dress that you remember as a little girl?

COLE: I do, that I came to the United States with a little white lace dress, yes, that you mention it. And these dresses were custom-made because there were no ready-made places. So my mother didn't sew, so we had someone make these. And I remember this dress, and I think I remember the dress that was in the picture that I,

it must have been taking, about five years old. I was crying. I think tears were even in the picture, and I came out right in the door, staying in the doorway as they were taking the picture.

SIGRIST: Can you describe . . .

COLE: I had an older brother, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe a Passover celebration for me in Europe?

COLE: That I don't remember. That I honestly cannot.

SIGRIST: You have a general memory of holidays, but nothing specific.

COLE: Yes, that's right. I think you've hit it, right. I remember them baking the matzos. I remember seeing them making it near the brook.

SIGRIST: Let's get back to your family. What was your mom's name?

COLE: In Yiddish it was Chana, and in the United States it was Anna.

SIGRIST: So is Chana, would that be C-H-A-N-A?

COLE: A-N-A. It's on the passport.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

COLE: Zlotnick.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

COLE: Z-L-O-T-N-I-C-K.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about your mother's background?

COLE: Her father, I think, had a little, a lot of the Jewish people, you know, it seems, I can't comprehend it, had little bars and grills. Bars, I mean where they'd sell liquor. I don't know what they looked like, honestly, because I didn't have it. But my mother claims that when I was born, some peasant sat on my head. I don't know if it affected it or not. But considering that the Jewish people did not drink except wine, you know, for religious occasions, which was really a surprise that they were in that business, you know. It's like the Irish saloon keepers, but, uh . . . (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Now, you said your mother was from a different town?

COLE: Yes, Butka, and that was even smaller than, because I have records of Mileiczicz, they have a population there. But these towns I do not know at all.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

COLE: Where did they meet? Isn't that funny. Probably through a marriage, through a chatkan, I believe, probably.

SIGRIST: Can you say the Yiddish word again, please?

COLE: Chatkan.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

COLE: C-H-A-T-K-A-N, the matchmaker.

SIGRIST: The matchmaker.

COLE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: This was a typical way for people to . . .

COLE: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about what that process was for us on tape?

COLE: Oh. It's, I think what it was in Fiddler on the Roof. I think it's as good as you're going to get. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: One family would contract a middle person.

COLE: Someone. Or some middle, yeah. There was usually, it didn't go through with. And the irony that when I meet people of India who look, you know, handsome couples, and I've often wondered whether they were, you know, matched. And they said, "Oh, yes." There were arranged marriages, you know, the, so.

SIGRIST: You said you had a brother. What was his name?

COLE: His name, Feivel, Philip, yes. He's older than I.

SIGRIST: How many years?

COLE: He was born just the outbreak, I believe, of World War I, 1914.

SIGRIST: Now, you said that your mother said to you that a peasant sat on your head when you were born.

COLE: That's right. Someone at the, it may have been in the other town, I'm not sure.

SIGRIST: Are there any other stories about your birth or surrounding your mother's pregnancy that she ever talked about?

COLE: Yes. She had, she broke a vein in her leg, yeah. And where she bled. And I was always afraid of, you know, inheriting that tendency.

SIGRIST: Was childbirth a dangerous thing for women at that time in this place?

COLE: You didn't hear many women actually dying of childbirth, but maybe a lot of children who died subsequently from the large families. This, you know, was all through Europe, regardless of religion or . . .

SIGRIST: Had you lost any siblings that you knew of?

COLE: I don't know. No.

SIGRIST: What was your mom's personality like?

COLE: She was a, my parents were rather gentle people, you know, quiet, gentle people. And they were, now, one thing is that my mother suffered what may have been terrible migraine headaches. And she had certain medication that she'd get from the pharmacist, the ordinary, even though I suppose they must have had some kind of routine aspirin, I don't know, and she'd get from Europe. And after we were living in the United States I think she may have still been getting that medicine from Europe. And then, of course, the war closed up. But her headaches, apparently, as far as I know she did not suffer from headaches afterwards.

SIGRIST: What do you remember of her suffering these headaches in Europe? Do you have any specific memories of this or what she would do when it would happen?

COLE: Not really, no. She was the one who said she had it and she needed this medication, and during the war it stopped, and I don't remember that she had these terrible headaches, which is really a mystery to me of what triggered it, I don't know.

SIGRIST: What memories do you have of your brother when you were growing up, in Europe at this point?

COLE: Yeah, he frightened the hell out of me when I thought I had eaten something that I had my dairy after my meat or something, and I just visualized God coming down. That was about the only thing, really.

SIGRIST: Were you close with your brother, or did you lead sort of separate lives?

COLE: Not that close, separate lives. Always did.

SIGRIST: He's quite a bit older than you.

COLE: Always did, because I went on to college and all. I mean, my education, and he just remained where he was and the, you know, almost typical of the Old World, yes.

SIGRIST: What did your mother talk, if your mother ever talked about what she endured during World War I?

COLE: Oh, yes. My brother may have been a victim of that, too, because they lived on bread and potatoes.

SIGRIST: A victim how?

COLE: You know, of World War I, nutritionally, which may have affected him.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see. He didn't die.

COLE: No, thank God. I mean, this brother, yes.

SIGRIST: Well, talk about what she used to tell about World War I.

COLE: They lived on bread and potatoes, black bread and potatoes. That's about all they could get. They occupied by the, no, I don't think they were occupied by the Germans, but that's what they had, they lived on.

SIGRIST: In better times, like when you were a child, what do you remember eating?

COLE: I don't even remember knowing a bagel when I was in Poland. It's the darndest thing.

SIGRIST: That was maybe an important part . . .

COLE: A pretzel, yes. Not a pretzel, but it was, but not an actual bagel. I do not remember that.

SIGRIST: Did you eat mostly vegetables?

COLE: Probably not. Probably the typical Jewish/Russian/ Polish food, borscht, stews and things that we ate. I mean, it was pretty much. I guess whatever, you know, tied to the country we lived in.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of your mother's parents?

COLE: No. They were gone.

SIGRIST: They were dead.

COLE: But my, and I do remember when my, I do remember when my paternal grandmother died, Rachel. She died of pneumonia, and my mother's mother died of pneumonia also. My grandfather lived on right up to the occupation of, luckily they fell into the Russian hands at the beginning. And so he must have been quite advanced in years. When the Russians came in, we still heard from them, yeah.

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl in Poland, what did you know about America?

COLE: Well, I mean we all wanted to be in America, you know. This was the magic word. I mean, all we knew was America, the magic, you know. That was the magic word, America. Anyone who had any connections with America, as we did because my father was here, you know, we were already one step, you know, ahead of the others, yes.

SIGRIST: Is your father plying his trade as a tailor in New York?

COLE: Oh, he's gone. I mean, I'm seventy-one, you know.

SIGRIST: No, no, I meant at that time. I mean, when he was in America was he . . .

COLE: Oh, yes, he did, yes. Yes, he worked, yes. He worked in shops, yes.

He always did.

SIGRIST: Is he writing back and forth to you, that you remember?

COLE: That I don't remember. That I don't remember. I must have written to my mother constantly.

SIGRIST: How did you think about your father when you were a little girl? Because you really . . .

COLE: You know, I didn't think. You don't think. It's, who was also interviewed on that? Someone besides President Clinton.

SIGRIST: Did you have a photograph of your father?

COLE: I don't even remember.

SIGRIST: So he's a pretty dim figure.

COLE: That's right. That's right. However, one thing that helped was that I lived with my uncle, his brother and grandfather. But someone says, "You don't know. If you don't ever saw them you don't know that you're missing the person." I mean, it's probably the same thing with President Clinton. You know, he never knew his father. He didn't know what he was missing. Someone else was interviewed recently and made the same analogy.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your mother telling you, "Well, we're going to go to America now?"

COLE: Oh, yes, I knew that. That I knew all the time. And I remember going for a visa to Bialystok.

SIGRIST: Where would you have to go to get it?

COLE: Imagine, I think I may have gone to the consul in Bialystok. Or was it, I think, no. I went to Bialystok, maybe for the consulate. I'm not sure. Because I did go to Bialystok, and then in Warsaw for the visa. And we stayed at the home of a woman who was an actress in the Yiddish theater. And I remember the home, you know, here I came from this little, you know, wooden shack almost. And I saw velvet and everything. She's an actress, you know, the magic of that. I never forgot that. I never forgot the savory food, the meat that I had. That always remained with me. I don't think I've ever forgotten that.

SIGRIST: And this is while you're staying in Warsaw, to get the visa.

COLE: Yeah, yeah. Then we had to go back, I think. But to get to Warsaw, to Bialystok we had to take a horse and buggy to the nearest town that had a railway station, so there was nothing ever direct from that shtetl.

SIGRIST: Now, do you remember when you were leaving your home for good.

COLE: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you took with you?

COLE: My mother, she believed so much in the United States, thought she was going into a wilderness. And she took things that are unbelievable. She took, not china but she took, we went I think to the store in Warsaw, Fraget used to be a store for whatchamacallit, cutlery and all. And she bought up, which we still have, I divided the spoons between my younger brother and myself. Heavy, not sterling. The name of the company was Fraget, F-R-A-G-E-T, Fraget, or whatever. And we have these heavy spoons, table, soup spoons like that. (she gestures) And, so she bought that. She brought all kinds of bedding and quilting and everything.

SIGRIST: So you took a lot of stuff with you, then.

COLE: She took a lot of stuff. And everybody said, you know, they couldn't get over it, all the relatives, all the stuff she brought. And I was going to mention that later. We were in Le Havre where we picked up the ship.

SIGRIST: Before we get you to Le Havre, do you remember saying goodbye to your uncle and your relatives?

COLE: Probably. I don't actually remember that.

SIGRIST: It's you and your brother and your mother.

COLE: Right.

SIGRIST: Anyone else from the town traveling with you?

COLE: No.

SIGRIST: Just the three of you.

COLE: Just the three of us.

SIGRIST: So when you left your town you went to where?

COLE: We took the horse, the horse and buggy to the nearest station, to
Warsaw.

SIGRIST: You went to Warsaw.

COLE: And then we took the train, the Transcontinental, to Le Havre. Now, we
did go into Germany, because it's on my passport, the day I was
in Germany. I mean, they gave us the visa en route. And we must
have gone through the low countries also.

SIGRIST: What time of the year is this?

COLE: It was May.

SIGRIST: May of 1928?

COLE: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Is this an adventure for a little girl or are you oblivious?

COLE: Oh, I was thrilled. Anything was always an adventure for me, even now.

Even this is an adventure for me. I've always loved to do things and get into all kinds of situations.

SIGRIST: Are there any stories that you remember of that trip to Le Havre?

COLE: Well, I remember the, that we were in flat country. Where in Germany I

don't know. We were in flat country, and then we went mountains, and we went into mountains, tunnels and all. That I remember,

whether it was the Voge Mountains, I don't know. I try to reconstruct it from maps, you know, to the direction of Le Havre.

That I remember, the tunnels and the mountains and all after we passed the flat country, because Poland is flat, the lowlands.

Germany is quite flat. So we must have been going towards France where, the mountainous region of France.

SIGRIST: Did you bring something from Poland with you that was yours, a toy or something that you remember?

COLE: You know, I really don't think so. The only things I had were the

dresses, you know, that I took with me. And I remember that

little white lacy-type dress, and the one I took. And I remember we used to make little garlands from the flowers, I think. That I remember, the flower gardens, the gardens in Poland. The pretty nice landscape, that little town, actually, that I remember. I remember, I think, the maypole. I remember Christmas, the sleighs that they went around in the winter, especially, at Christmas. I do remember that.

SIGRIST: So there was a Gentile population in this town, as well as a Jewish population.

COLE: Definitely, oh, definitely. They were Probably more than the Jewish population, yes. I would say from what my mother told me that they were probably mostly Polish by this time, after World War I, although previously it would have been Russian. So my parents knew a little bit of Polish, a little bit of Russian, and Yiddish. And then they called the Poyersh language. It was a peasant . . .

SIGRIST: Can you say that again, please?

COLE: Poyersh. Now, I thought it was a peasant language, it was a peasant language, but it sounded like a Slavic language. A number of years ago, I think about thirty years ago, I was taking a course in Russian history. And the professor was not Russian but he, his life work had been writing this Russian history and all. And

I, Professor Clarkson, and I said, "Do you know what the language Poyersh is?" He said, "No." I said, "It sounds Slavic." He says, "It sounds Slavic to me, too." A few days later he comes back and he says, "I know your Poyersh language." It came from the German Bauer, Boer, meaning peasant. And by the time it got to the Jewish people in Poland, maybe the others too, it was Poyersh, from the Bauers, so I thought that was rather interesting.

SIGRIST: Have you any idea how to spell Poyersh, Poyersh?

COLE: I know the German spelling, Boer, from the Dutch in South Africa, and Boer, Bauer, in German. B-A-U-E-R. But Poyersh is probably not a written language. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: That's interesting.

COLE: I thought it was rather fascinating.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause for a moment, and Kevin is going to flip over all the tapes, and then we'll get you on your way to America.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay. How long did you stay in Le Havre before you got on the

boat?

COLE: Well, can I just make a few more memory images of Poland?

SIGRIST: All right.

COLE: I remember gypsies there. I don't know if I actually saw them, but they were always, you know, everybody was scared of the gypsies. And I remember the story of a boy who drowned in a well. And then I remember seeing a snake. The whole town came to that. Now, I was five years old or something, but to me, to this day it still looked like a massive snake, and it came from the hay wagon, yeah. So I remember that.

SIGRIST: You know, one question I wanted to ask you was since it was such a large Gentile population in your town, what was the relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles?

COLE: You know, at that age I really don't know. I really don't know. However, there was one story that was told to me. Incidentally, part of the family name was changed because in the 19th Century you know they took young boys and brought them, put them into the army and disconnected them from their families, from their religion and everything, and there was this story that came back. And you know how we were afraid of authority because, uh, you know, any Fascist country, I think the only places we would have

felt safe in probably would have been France and England. Someone came in in military uniforms, scared. This was in the 19th Century, scared the hell out of the family, and he identified himself as the son who had been taken away.

SIGRIST: You said your name had been changed.

COLE: I mean my father's name.

SIGRIST: Well, can you spell your maiden name for us on tape.

COLE: Oh, T-R-O-S-T-A-N-I-C-K-I.

SIGRIST: And pronounce it.

COLE: Trostanicki. And we came to the States, it was changed to Trost, T-R-O-S-T.

SIGRIST: What does the name mean?

COLE: It's the name of a town, and I think it has a Germanic root. The reason we got that name is I understand the family name was Hirschenhorn. And so that some of the children wouldn't be taken into the army they, you know, gave themselves another family, and they took the name of a town. I think there is a town like that in Germany. It has, Trost is a Germanic root, and I think it is a German name also.

SIGRIST: Okay. Well, let's get you back to Le Havre here. How long were you at Le Havre?

COLE: I must have been there, if I can see the papers.

SIGRIST: Sure, go ahead, look at your notes.

COLE: I embarked, oh, I don't know when I got to Le Havre. I know I embarked at Le Havre May 16, 1928, arrived in New York May 23, 1928 on the France, I think it was France No. 2.

SIGRIST: What do you remember of the boat from the point of view of a young girl?

COLE: Oh, marvelous. Everybody was seasick, even though this was May. And I think only I and another little French girl were the only ones who were not seasick, and we could only communicate in sign language. And this is where my notes came in. It may be a little long, but in 1939, 1940, I heard of a young French girl about my age who was going to Long Island University with some other friends I had, and that she had come from France, and I was hoping that it was she, but it turned out not to be she.
(she laughs)

SIGRIST: Can you describe what your accommodations looked like?

COLE: I really don't remember but it was not, I'm sure it was not the

steerage of the early immigrant waves. It was third class, but I'm sure it wasn't quite steerage. Now, these are the things that I thought. It may make it a little long. I don't know if you . . .

SIGRIST: I'd prefer you not read anything.

COLE: All right. Now, what I, I am tone deaf as far as music is concerned.

But I remember the women dancing on the ship at cocktails, at tea time. I remember that definitely. And it had influence my life profoundly because ever since then I've, you know, traveled wherever I can, gone on ships. They were dressed in what seemed to me chiffon dresses. It may have been that the women came down from several classes. I don't know whether they were coming down from first or second class, but I was up there to see them, and this was a profound experience for me. Before I leave Le Havre, my mother always used to say in Europe that there are people in the world who are black, and of course coming from Eastern Europe, you know. And then in France we saw black people unloading at the docks. You know, it was really, you know, a shock to us. And then I think we may have made a trip into Paris, or it could have been Paris, and we bought a valise. And I tell you, I held onto it, because it came from France, and maybe up till about twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years I held onto that till it was falling apart. Finally I just had to throw

it out.

SIGRIST: As if your mother didn't have enough luggage with you. (they laugh)

COLE: Yes. Oh, I think we needed the valise to put more of the stuff in, exactly.

SIGRIST: Did they have organized activities on the boat for you to do?

COLE: I don't remember. I think everybody was too sick for organized activities. All I remember was this little girl and I running around. We had the run of the ship in sign language. It was really amazing.

SIGRIST: What about lifeboat drills and that sort of thing?

COLE: I don't remember. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: So how long was the trip? It was a few days?

COLE: It was about seven days.

SIGRIST: Seven days.

COLE: But, see, I embarked on May 16th and I arrived on May 23rd so, roughly.

SIGRIST: Tell me what your first impressions of seeing the Statue of Liberty in New York.

COLE: The Statue of Liberty I really don't remember. I don't remember. All I think is that we must have come to Ellis Island here, and then a relative's father picked us up, and we went to New Jersey and we stayed with relatives in Bayonne, New Jersey.

SIGRIST: Do you have any specific recollections of the processing at all?

COLE: Oh, just going through, I think, the Holland Tunnel and all, and the car, yeah. But . . .

SIGRIST: But the processing, I mean, the immigration part, or meeting your father, for that matter.

COLE: Yes. You know, I don't even, I can't even recall that as a great experience. I really don't. What, there was an in-between thing. Oh, yes. I think I ate my first banana on the boat. And then in New Jersey we had sweet corn. And I saw my first movie on the boat. And I came back about a year or two later. When I went to the movies I cried in the movies.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the movie was?

COLE: No, not because of the picture. I think I was just afraid of being in the dark. Although I saw it on the boat, it probably wasn't as dark on the boat. But when neighbors took me to the movies and they never took me again, they, and then afterwards I wanted to be a movie critic.

SIGRIST: Maybe that's why.

COLE: Yeah. But I did eat sweet corn, that was, and that taste, the original corn, I'd never had that in Europe.

SIGRIST: But you have no recollections of actually seeing your father for the first time and making that connection.

COLE: No, not really. I honestly cannot say that, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your mother seeing your father?

COLE: I don't remember. And also relatives were with us, you know, relatives were there. They came all together.

SIGRIST: What relatives were they?

COLE: My mother's great aunt and her family came, you know, and they just whisked us off to Bayonne, New Jersey.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little bit then about what it was like, maybe, those first couple months of being in a new country and seeing things.

COLE: Well, we got an apartment, apparently, before, not too soon after in, which is now one of the worst parts of Brooklyn outside of Bedford Stuyvesant.

SIGRIST: So you didn't stay in Bayonne long.

COLE: No, no. We were just there till, uh, and I, so I know because I went to school, kindergarten. For about three or four weeks, I was left back in kindergarten, and I started the next year again in kindergarten. I didn't speak the language, I was there for a month. But I made up for it later, when they skipped you, you know. Every six months I was able to go from I think 2A, 2B or 2B to 3A or whatever.

SIGRIST: How did you learn English?

COLE: I don't know. I don't know. I just, because we didn't have bilingual programs.

SIGRIST: Had your father Americanized?

COLE: He became a citizen in '27.

SIGRIST: Just before you got here, then.

COLE: No, before we got here.

SIGRIST: Before you got here, yeah.

COLE: So I was, I was technically a citizen on derivative citizenship, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me, then, about your mother and your mother's reaction to America and how she adjusted to this country.

COLE: Um, there were certain things she could never do. She could never wash windows and sit outside as women who had been living here longer used to, their backsides sticking out. I don't know if you know, if you'd ever seen that. Their backsides sticking out and washing the windows. She could never do that, and I could never do it. (she laughs) That's one part where she never adjusted, to some of the things that other women did. For some reason I don't think we had wall-to-wall newspapers in the house, you know, after washing the floors. I don't believe we did. (she laughs) You know that joke about the wall-to-wall newspapers? Well, you know, after they washed the floors preparing for the Sabbath they'd put newspapers out so the floors wouldn't get dirty, and that's why the comedians have, you know, a good time talking about wall-to-wall newspapers. (she laughs) We didn't do that. But she could never sit out to wash a window. She'd maneuver it, you know, with mops and things, but never sit out. I was horrified. Of course, I couldn't rollerskate as kids, and I saw kids rollerskating. It was magic to me when kids rollerskated. My mother wouldn't think of it, you know. You'd fall on your back. But behind her back someone had a pair of old rollerskates and I did learn to, I did learn to rollerskate.

SIGRIST: Did your mother learn English?

COLE: The both of them did not really speak English.

SIGRIST: Your father didn't either?

COLE: No, they didn't speak English well. They didn't speak English, really.

SIGRIST: Was it that they pretty much lived in a neighborhood where . . .

COLE: Partially. I don't know. My mother could have gone to school. Oh, she always, she had dots before her eyes. She always said she had dots, (Yiddish). She had dots in front of her eyes, so she couldn't really read and do things.

SIGRIST: Could she read Yiddish and write Yiddish?

COLE: Yeah. I think we all did, yeah. I mean, I went to a Hebrew school, yeah.

SIGRIST: Describe the first apartment that you lived in.

COLE: She might have read a little Polish, too, or Russian. She might have.

SIGRIST: But she did read and write.

COLE: Oh, yes. They were not illiterate. You know, they were not illiterate. They were, you know, literate in Yiddish. And I think they also probably did read a bit of Russian and Polish, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the first apartment for me, just sort of walk me through it.

COLE: Oh, it was a cold water flat, and we had no radio, you know, and people were already having radios, and it was about three rooms. And in a very poor part. You just, there was no shower or bathtub. It was in the kitchen. Yeah, it, and that was from 1928 to 1936. And then we moved to a slightly larger apartment. And that had steam heat.

SIGRIST: Tell me how the Crash affected your father, if at all?

COLE: Yes, it did.

SIGRIST: The Crash comes in October of '29.

COLE: Yeah. We had a hard time. Relatives gave us, you know, it was in the bakery business. Something would bring us bread and, you know, things, and borrowed money from an uncle who had a little more. My father paid him back every cent. Yeah, oh, yeah. It, it hurt, yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember, you know, you're a little bit older at this point. What do you remember seeing in New York at that time that struck you, the beginning of the Depression?

COLE: I don't know. One thing I will say, my father took my brother and me

to all the museums and the parks, so I did have that little background. Plus when I used to go to the relatives in Bayonne.

Of course, when we spoke about oil cities and mentioned Bayonne, I remember one teacher said, "Oh, my God, that hasn't been an oil city for . . ." (she laughs)

SIGRIST: But do you remember seeing things in New York that were a direct result of the Depression.

COLE: Yeah, I'm trying to recollect. As a result of the Depression, I don't know. I mean, I saw people evicted from their homes, and, oh, it was a pretty brutal life.

SIGRIST: Did your mother get a job outside of the house?

COLE: My mother never worked outside. She . . .

SIGRIST: Did she bring work in?

COLE: No, no.

SIGRIST: So you were living on your father's salary, then.

COLE: Yeah. What . . .

SIGRIST: Well, what about your older brother? Did he get a job?

COLE: He started to work a little, but also, you know, sort of almost hand out, you know, people knew someone needed a little assistance.

It was rough. It was very rough. I think we may have even had to go on welfare for a short time, because things got so bad.

SIGRIST: Was this a primarily Jewish neighborhood you were living in?

COLE: It was primarily, Brownsville. If you've heard of it, now it's really bad. But, you know, it's very funny. When I was teaching in Bedford Stuyvesant I had a kid, I think the family's from Puerto Rico, and they had moved to Bedford Stuyvesant. And I looked at his record, and I see the address, 480 Powell Street. That was the building I had lived in. And I approached him, and I said, "You know, I lived in that building." He couldn't believe it. Here I was, a middle-class educated woman, living where he lives. You know, then I described the streets. I remembered the names.

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl growing up in New York, what did you do for fun?

COLE: You know, well, first I started to read. I was reading junk, but, I was reading the Motor Girls and the Bobsey Twins and all that. But in the winter I remember playing, if it snowed there were mountains of snow. We played in the snow, yes.

SIGRIST: What about your parents? What did they do for entertainment?

COLE: They didn't. They didn't. I think they, it's not the way I lived my life afterwards, no.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me a typical evening when you're maybe ten years old in New York, from the time Dad got home from work, what was an evening like?

COLE: I don't know. He'd read the paper.

SIGRIST: I assume this is a Yiddish paper.

COLE: A Yiddish paper, yes. I don't know. I really don't know.

SIGRIST: Would your mother make dinner?

COLE: Yes, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you eat in America?

COLE: Well, pretty much make borscht, chicken. Oh, the chicken soup was so thick that you could eat it with a fork, and I almost got sick from it, I did. By the time I was going to college and I was struggling, I went at night, and I had a catarrhal attack in my stomach, and the doctor said, "What are you eating?" "Oh, very, you know, I'm eating chicken soup." And the day I was home, Friday night, the beans, the gefilte fish, and all. He said, "You have a lopsided diet." And I was put on a very rigid diet. And when I make chicken soup, boy, I get that fat out.

SIGRIST: So this is typical Jewish cooking then.

COLE: Oh, yes, definitely.

SIGRIST: So maybe your food didn't change that much from Europe to America.

COLE: No. But older, we didn't have quite as much. We had more steak and lamb chops and chopped meat and things like that, yeah.

SIGRIST: I assume your father liked America. I mean, otherwise he wouldn't have stayed.

COLE: Yes, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: But how about your mother? Did she like America?

COLE: She always said, "Thank God." I mean, she always felt so grateful, especially during the Holocaust, that we were here. And I feel so grateful that I was here, and that I had a chance to do something with myself. I really do. I got the education, and thank God City College, for City College, I was able to go through. I went in the evenings, though. And I didn't get my degree till 1960. I had left college for good behavior. I had two children in the interim. My husband said, he worked for the government, had a modest job, and he said, "Get your degree. If anything happens to me, you'll have something to fall back on." And this is precisely what happened.

SIGRIST: What was your first job that you got?

COLE: Oh, it was terrible. Well, I tried to work during the summers in a factory in some, with the neighbors in some, where they made some kind of this cheap, not diamonds, those rhinestones. Ooh, and the smell of lacquer still bothers me to this day. I didn't do it so much to, you know, earn that much money, but it was really an experience for me. And I'm trying to remember whether in between I didn't, I think go backstage, Stage Door Fanny, and get autographs from actors in the theaters. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: How old were you when you were working in the factory?

COLE: I may have been about fifteen, I think.

SIGRIST: Was this typical for young women?

COLE: No! I just did it, no. As a matter of fact, it wasn't so much for the money, but a neighbor did it, and I think I did it more to see, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you were paid?

COLE: Oh, God. My first real job, this was just as the war was breaking out, and, you know, you make many mistakes in life. I was getting paid six dollars a week, five-and-a-half days working for a lawyer. And I said, "Well, I better get this job now." It took

me over a year to get it. And I said, "I better take it, because, you know, within two years I'll have two years' experience rather than starting from nothing." The war broke out, they were making so much money, you know. And I could have been going to college or taking other jobs. You know, during the day I was accepted to Day College and I didn't take it. This was 1940.

SIGRIST: In our last couple of minutes . . .

COLE: '41.

SIGRIST: . . . I'd just like to have you say your husband's name.

COLE: Sanford Allen Cole, yes. He was born in the United States. His father was born in London, and his mother was born in the United States. We were completely different socially, I mean, as far as family background. Jewish, yes.

SIGRIST: When did you meet him?

COLE: In 1947.

SIGRIST: And when did you marry him?

COLE: 1947. (they laugh) A few months later. And my children . . .

SIGRIST: And you said you had two children.

COLE: Yeah. My daughter was born three years later in 1950 and my son in 1955.

SIGRIST: And what are their names?

COLE: David and Deborah, biblical names. In other words, you can't say you know that this kid was born this year because all the Jeffreys were born in one year, and now it's going to be some other names. What is the name of the, the name this year? I don't know, something, anyway.

SIGRIST: Now, you said after you got your degree you began to teach.

COLE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you have any special perspective, especially teaching, like you spoke about teaching the Puerto Rican boy.

COLE: Yes, yeah.

SIGRIST: Yourself, having been an immigrant and seeing children who are in similar circumstances, and couldn't you just relate a little of that to us.

COLE: Well, actually, I didn't get many foreign children, certainly not in Bedford Stuyvesant.

SIGRIST: Well, let's say underprivileged children.

COLE: Oh, they're all underprivileged. But what I liked, and . . .

SIGRIST: But because you had come from a . . .

COLE: Oh, an underprivileged background. But when I got out of college I didn't know, although my husband thought teaching would be the best thing for me, I took an aptitude test, and I have an aversion to anything medical almost, sickness, everything. So whenever there was a question, you know, "Would you like to work in a hospital?" Blah, blah, blah, blah, you know, everything was negative. Well, they came back and they said, it practically turned out that I had no social conscience. And I told them, "No." I said, "I don't care how poor the kid is, how smelly the kid is, you know. I just want to teach them." But sickness is one thing, and whenever I, I could never be homebound teacher for that reason. If they could guarantee me kids who broke, fell down and broke their legs and would be all right, you know, in a month or two, that's fine. But knowing that some of these kids could die, you know, that they were, you know, had some permanent disability or were, you know, I mean, I couldn't take that. I couldn't take that.

SIGRIST: Did you feel any kind of connection to these children, you know, having come from a similar economic background yourself sort of before . . .

COLE: I was just interested in teaching them and getting, finding kids who really wanted to learn, and this was my, you know, big thing. And I walked out with a good reputation from Bedford Stuyvesant.

SIGRIST: How many years did you teach?

COLE: Five years. And the principal, you know, was getting a transfer to be nearer where my husband picked me up and all that, and he died right afterwards. But the principal said, "I hope your transfer doesn't come through." You know.

SIGRIST: Are you glad you came to America?

COLE: Oh, God, I wouldn't be here if I weren't. I could say, "God Bless America." I really can. Now, I was going to say an offbeat thing that affected my life, well, it's a lot to go into. But anyway, that was, the ship and the. Now, the music I didn't remember at all, because I'm tone deaf. But in the 1940's they played some records, some song on the radio. My mom said, "This is what they played on the ship." It turned out to be "Valencia," which was a song of the 1920's. And every time I hear that song now and all it just reminds me of the ship, a song that I never heard or don't remember, but it always influenced my life, and I hear it now I think of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda Fitzgerald and all that. Yeah. And other things. Oh, yes. Another thing is that, I was going to say, there was an

article . . .

SIGRIST: We have about a minute left, Mrs. Cole.

COLE: Oh, I'm sorry. All right. My mother always referred to the fact that we came via (?), and I knew it was via, it was Havre. And I knew it couldn't be Versailles and all. And you know what I found out it was? Via Havre, and (?), you know. So anyway, but that was, that's my story.

SIGRIST: Well, I want to thank you very much.

COLE: That's my story.

SIGRIST: Sure, for coming out to Ellis Island today.

COLE: Oh, my pleasure. I enjoyed it.

SIGRIST: And recording this for us. It's certainly an interesting story, and you have a great memory, too.

COLE: Memory images, but certain things. And thank God that I do remember them, because it makes it more interesting.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Fanny Cole on Thursday, July 29th, 1993 at the Ellis Island immigration studio. Thank you.