

EI-386

LILLIAN NEEDLEMAN STICKLE

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WPA EMPLOYEE AT ELLIS ISLAND

1937-1939

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, September 14, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Lillian Stickle. Mrs. Stickle was a WPA employee at Ellis Island between 1937 and 1939. Welcome.

STICKLE: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

SIGRIST: I want to add that Mrs. Stickle lives in Tucson, so you've come a ways.

STICKLE: Yes.

SIGRIST: Let's begin by you giving me your birth date.

STICKLE: I was born March 15, 1919.

SIGRIST: And what was your maiden name?

STICKLE: My maiden name was Needelman, N-E-E-D-E-L-M-A-N.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me a little bit about your parents' background? I know they came through Ellis Island as immigrants.

STICKLE: Yes. My parents, both my mother and father, came to the United States from Kiev, Russia, which I assume is now the Ukraine. They arrived in this country in 1906. They were both quite young. Mom was a very young girl, maybe twelve or thirteen years old. Dad was a little older. And they came with their families, which was quite an extensive family. They settled here in New York City and, um, Mom, who'd been a very spoiled, pampered young schoolgirl back in Russia, found that life here was not as easy as she had thought it would be, and she was forced to go to work in a factory at the age of about thirteen years old. This was a young lady who'd been just a very lovely schoolgirl. Dad, uh, came here. He must have been about seventeen or eighteen, a little older than my mother was. They both came in 1906. And he, uh, had not had very much formal education, but he was an extremely bright person and very interested in everything and managed to, uh, keep life going at

various things that he did. He and Mom were married in 1917 and, um, uh, lived together till their about 53rd wedding anniversary.

SIGRIST: Wow. Did they know each other in Russia?

STICKLE: No. They did not know each other in Russia, but they were probably introduced to each other here in the States by a mutual friend or family who introduced them to each other.

SIGRIST: So it was just by coincidence they came in 1906.

STICKLE: Yes, they just . . .

SIGRIST: They didn't travel with the same group of people.

STICKLE: No. No, no. They just happened to come, they came as a result of the, uh, horrible pogroms that were taking place in Russia at the time and whoever was lucky enough to get out was lucky enough to get out.

SIGRIST: I'm just curious, did any of them, did either of them ever tell any stories about the immigration experience, or about Ellis Island?

STICKLE: Well, uh, we heard about their immigration experience coming over, my mother's family, in the steerage. My

grandfather had already been here. He sort of set things up for them. My grandmother traveled by herself with several of the children, who were quite young at the time, in steerage. One of the children was almost lost because of illness during the journey, but they did manage to get here intact as a family. My father was very proud of the fact that he did not come over in steerage. He came over second class, I want you to know. And he had no untoward experiences that he ever talked about coming over here. It was actually setting into the country and finding work and places to live, that was quite a thing for them.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about your own experience having been born in this country, but of immigrant parents, and what was that like growing up?

STICKLE: Well, it was great growing up. Uh, most everybody we knew were first generation American, I mean, people of my particular time, who had parents who had come from the old country. And it was a good experience. There was a warmth, a family feeling, a wonderful, great feeling of family that I think is lacking as our generations succeed and we're all dispersed, but they all settled in fairly the same neighborhood. We had

aunts and uncles and cousins and friends of the family. We were just a big extended family. They talked frequently of their experiences in the old country. We had a very good background of what their life had been like. They were not reluctant to discuss anything that had happened in their previous time. So it was a good feeling. It was growing up in a very good feeling.

SIGRIST: Would you say that, would you say that they were very proud of their immigrant roots, or was that something that they felt they wanted to leave behind?

STICKLE: No, they were, I would say they were proud. They both continued to speak Russian. They were proud of the fact that they spoke the language. My mother was very well-educated for a person her age, and she spoke and read in Russian. They were proud of their backgrounds. They were glad to have gotten away from the horrible situation, but they spoke proudly of what their background had been. They gave us a good feeling of where they came from.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about how they felt about you getting an education?

STICKLE: Well, that was the big thing, you see. We had to have an education. It was the primary thing. Uh, it was important, we were, we did our homework. There were no excuses. You went to school. You respected the teacher. This was a big thing in the life of our family. Uh, we, uh, did not, unfortunately, were able to continue into university because of the bad times, the Depression, so that any education beyond high school we more or less got on our own. My sister fortunately went to college at night, but I did not have the opportunity. But education was very important, and there was a great emphasis on it. The house was full of books, the house was full of music, the house was full of interesting conversations about everything that was going on in the world.

SIGRIST: Let me ask everybody's name before we get going. Your father's name?

STICKLE: My father's name was Alexander. We called him Alex, A-L-E-X.

SIGRIST: And your mother?

STICKLE: My mother's was Rose.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

STICKLE: Her maiden name was Gassman, G-A-S-S-M-A-N.

SIGRIST: And your siblings?

STICKLE: I have an older brother whose name is Bernard, and I have a younger sister whose name is Irma.

SIGRIST: And all three kids were born here?

STICKLE: We were all born here, yes.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me, did you get a job right out of high school?

STICKLE: Yes. I got a job right out of high school. I was fifteen when I graduated high school. I was a good student, I must say very modestly. But there was no opportunity to go on to higher education. So I got a job at age fifteen. It was not at Ellis Island. Ellis Island was actually my second job, which I was about seventeen, I guess, when I got this. But I got a job right out of high school. It paid a mere pittance, but I had to go to work. And I, it took me a summer to find the job, but I found it.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what that job was and how much you got

paid, if you remember?

STICKLE: Well, the job was working for a person who was a sales representative of ladies' underclothing, uh, girdles, to be exact. I worked for him for a year. I got eight dollars a week. That was for a forty-four hour week. I worked five days during the week and half a day on Saturday. It was my first job.

SIGRIST: And were you expected to contribute to the household?

STICKLE: Oh, yes, indeed. We took, uh, my money for carfare and lunches, and the rest went into the house. There was no question about that. That was a fact.

SIGRIST: And that would have been the same for your brother and sister once they entered the work force.

STICKLE: My brother, uh, was able to learn a very good trade when he got, was going to high school. He was taught by a member of, or a friend of the member of the family, so that became his, he'd go from school to learn his trade. And my sister, too, she went to high school, and she went to work, and she contributed money to the household. That was it.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me how you got, how you got involved with

the WPA.

STICKLE: Well, times were very bad. There was what we called the Great Depression, and things were very, very tough. And, for a while, there was just, uh, I don't know what they call it now, it was a short period where we were getting aid, what do they call it, welfare, now. It was not considered welfare. But there was a short period when we were on, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Public assistance.

STICKLE: Public funds. Public assistance. And then we were required to work. I mean, this public assistance did not go on forever. So I got the job through the WPA, because the family had been on public assistance. And when I got the job we were immediately removed from the public assistance, so that's how I got to the WPA.

SIGRIST: Okay. Can explain to the listeners or the readers of this interview who might not be quite so familiar with what the WPA was, can you just explain it a little bit in your own words?

STICKLE: Well, it was, uh, actually jobs that more or less were created but in the long run became very, very

wonderful things, because the results of some of this work still exist in the world today. This was work to give people work so that they were not on the dole. They worked for their money. There were various projects. There were things, they were artistic projects, there were literary projects, there were street infrastructure projects, if you want to call it that, putting sidewalks in streets and buildings, and there exists today in the part of the country where I come from now, in the little town of Bisby, Arizona, the city hall there was built by WPA funds in 1938, '39, or whatever, so that, and at the University of Arizona there are still evidences of the infrastructure work that was done by WPA workers. Sidewalks, streets, curbs, I mean, things like that. Uh, my particular work was doing this, was here on Ellis Island. I was a typist, because that's what I had learned to do at school, and I was able to do that work. But despite the, um, derogatory tones that people speak of the WPA, there was very, some very good, constructive and worthwhile work, and it gave people a sense of pride. They were not taking a handout. They were working for their money, which was quite important.

SIGRIST: I've never heard anyone refer to it in a derogatory way. Always with the highest esteem.

STICKLE: No, we used to hear about people say, "Oh, they work for the WPA. They're standing and holding onto their shovels." I mean, this was something that you would hear, and I resented it, because I knew there were things, we made up tables for mathematics, things like that. There were a very great many things that were beneficial that came out of that period.

SIGRIST: Perhaps it's been in retrospect that people have developed a respect for the WPA.

STICKLE: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: But when it was going on, maybe people looked at it differently.

STICKLE: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Um, tell me how you interviewed for the job?

STICKLE: Uh, how did I interview for the job? Uh, we received a call at home, and . . .

SIGRIST: You were living in New York?

STICKLE: I was living in, yes. I was a very young girl. I was about seventeen, I guess, and we received a call at home, and said that I had been working at this first little job that I had, that there were typist positions open, uh, and that they thought I might qualify for it, would I be interested in coming down for an interview. Now, I don't remember any longer where that interview was. It was someplace in Manhattan. And I was told the job was on Ellis Island, would I be interested. And, of course, I was young, and I thought it was very glamorous, so I said, "Of course." And, so, uh, a gentleman brought me over here, the one who had interviewed me in the office. I don't remember his name. I don't remember who the first person was I saw here on Ellis Island who accepted me for the job. There were papers to fill in.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you knew about Ellis Island, or what, what that meant to you at that time?

STICKLE: What I knew about Ellis Island was the fact that my parents and all the members of my family and many of our friends had arrived in the United States through Ellis Island, that it was a place where people were

sort of weeded out. There were many people who were turned back because, for various reasons of health or whatever it was. But, uh, Ellis Island to me was the place where my parents arrived. We'd see it, we'd take the Staten Island Ferry, as most New Yorkers did, and you'd see Ellis Island. It was just like a big fortress standing in the middle of the harbor. And, of course, the Statue of Liberty was always there.

SIGRIST: Now, um, what time of the year was this when you first came to work there?

STICKLE: I really don't remember exactly, Paul. It was, I remember wearing a winter coat and a hat, so it was probably during the cold, the cold season.

SIGRIST: I see. So they took you out by ferry.

STICKLE: They took me out by ferry, and they brought me to somebody here, and I filled in papers and signed my name and was told to report to work the following Monday.

SIGRIST: When you went back to tell your mother and your father that you got the job at Ellis Island, or that you got a job at all . . .

STICKLE: Uh-huh, yeah.

SIGRIST: I mean, what was their reaction to that?

STICKLE: Well, the reaction was quite good. The job at Ellis Island, I don't remember what the salary was at the time, but it was more than what I had been earning at eight dollars a week. And they were quite excited about it, that this would be not run-of-the-mill. That this would be something different from everybody else's children who were just doing, you know, jobs, and so they were quite interested and quite excited about it.

SIGRIST: Kind of a unique . . .

STICKLE: Yeah, we were unique. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Place to go to work. Well, tell me about your first day at work. What do you remember? Do you remember what you were wearing at your first day at work?

STICKLE: Oh, probably a skirt and a blouse and a winter coat and a hat. It was probably a gray suit, a skirt, and a red blouse, because that, the colors that I wore mostly. They brought me into this tremendous room, which I understand now is the Great Hall. We didn't

know what it was called. Uh, introduced me to the, uh, we were set up at tables in groups of ten, and each group of ten had a supervisor of sorts. There were typewriters, there were stacks and stacks and stacks of 3 x 5 cards. And then they had these, I was, it was a big, light, very lovely, airy room, and I was told that these great big manifests, that had been the ship's manifests, were being transcribed onto these 3 x 5 cards and that we were required to read from the manifests and type it. It was really exciting because the manifests were antique, the handwritings were sometimes difficult to read, the names, of course, Polish, Italian, all sorts of European names, were hard for us to decipher. And then we were required to turn out a certain number of, a certain amount of work each day. There was no sitting on your hands and not doing anything. We had required, we had a, I don't know what you call it, a certain amount that was required.

SIGRIST: Like a quota. (he laughs)

STICKLE: A quota. Really, that's what it was. The people, generally, the people I worked with were very pleasant. They were all young people like me, who

were, had come from families where they needed the jobs, and I was very happy here. I had a very happy time working here. It was quite nice.

SIGRIST: How many of there were, how many of you were there working, would you say?

STICKLE: I'd say about a hundred, a hundred of us working, uh, at, there were tables, large tables set up, and there were ten of us. And I think somewhere in the area of a hundred people working.

SIGRIST: And what's going on around you? What else is going on in that room?

STICKLE: What's going on around us is everybody typing like mad. Um, we'd get periods during the day where we had a break, you know, to have coffee or whatever there was at the time, and this was just work. This was not play. This was real work. It was a concentrated effort to turn out a product.

SIGRIST: Were you supervised by one person, or were you pretty much left on your own?

STICKLE: Uh, we had, each table of ten had a supervisor who, then there were supervisors, they were echelons of

supervisory persons. Uh, yeah, that's, that's what it was. There was one person who headed it. I don't remember any more who that person was, whether it was a man or a woman, but generally it was a pleasant place to work. And, uh, the young people, we were friendly with each other, we met each other on the ferry coming over, and we'd have coffee on the ferry, and many of us became friends afterwards, I mean, outside of the working place, because we were very much alike, same backgrounds and stuff. It was a nice place to work. It really was.

SIGRIST: Where did you catch the ferry, and met them?

STICKLE: The Battery. We'd take the subway. I lived up in the Bronx at the time. We'd take the subway down to the Battery, get the ferry there, it brought us right over to the island here, and then returned the other way.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the ferry for me?

STICKLE: Uh, yes. It was a little ferry. It was, uh, I'd say, about, oh, a third the size of the Staten Island Ferry, maybe. There was no facilities for cars to go on. It was strictly a people ferry. There was a small bar there where you could get coffee or hot tea

or whatever you drank in the morning. There were benches on each side. And in the nice weather we sat outside, in the cold weather we sat inside. And it rocked. It depended upon the weather, what the day was like, whether it was wild or smooth. Uh, sometimes in the nice weather we stayed outside in the outside to get benefit, you know. It was a small ferry.

SIGRIST: And where would the ferry dock on Ellis Island?

STICKLE: Right at the main building. The dock came right to the main building. We walked off the ferry onto the dock and up the stairs into the main building.

SIGRIST: So directly right.

STICKLE: Yes, it was a very direct way to go.

SIGRIST: Tell me some of the things that you saw at Ellis Island, aside from your work. What were some of the things that you saw while you were here?

STICKLE: You mean, on the island itself?

SIGRIST: On the island itself, or maybe things going on that didn't, um, didn't pertain to you, but things that you

might have witnessed going on in the main building, if anything.

STICKLE: Well, in the main building there was really nothing except this big hall where we worked, the corridors that we walked through to get to the outdoors or to the, um, cafeteria. The buildings, except for the main building, were in pretty much disrepair. They were just deserted old buildings with beautifully structured, I mean, as far as architecture went, but there was nothing. They were skeleton buildings. There was no, there was no life on the island, actually, except the group of us who were working there. There was also a group of civil service workers. They were actually the main workers here. I think they might have been the Immigration and Naturalization Service. I'm not sure any more. But they were a group, and they worked in one of the big halls, too. And we were the only really live people on this island. There was nothing else to see there.

SIGRIST: Where, um, where on the island were you allowed to go, and where were you not allowed to go?

STICKLE: We were allowed to go in the main building only where

we were, in the big hall where we worked, and in the other big hall where the civil service people worked, and in the corridors to the cafeteria and to outside the building. We were not permitted access to any other part of the island. It was off limits.

SIGRIST: Um, what about eating? Talk about lunch.

STICKLE: All right. Lunch, there was a cafeteria. On Friday we'd probably have lunch at the cafeteria. It was the big day. The rest of the time we brown-bagged our lunch, but when the weather was nice we'd sit out on the lawn or on the steps and have our lunch. When the weather was bad we'd sit at our desks or inside the hall. And, as I say, Friday was the day for eating at the cafeteria. I remember they had Yankee pot roast here. It was the first time I'd ever seen or heard of Yankee pot roast. That was the big meal on Friday. And the rest of the time we just had our lunch outdoors or in, you know, at our desks.

SIGRIST: You mentioned bad weather. Do you remember being on the island during any kind of very bad weather, a snowstorm or something like that, a bad rainstorm.

STICKLE: I remember in, I guess it was 1938, there was a

hurricane. We got to the island in the morning. It was choppy, it was bad. By the time we were supposed to leave late in the afternoon, there was a real hurricane going. It was wild. And we watched the flag literally being ripped to pieces by the wind. We were talking about perhaps having to stay on overnight at the island since they were, it was kind of, you know, touchy about getting back to the Battery, but they got us back. But it was a very, it was a real hurricane, it was a severe storm. And it was very, you know, seasicky sort of trip back to the mainland.

Other than that it was winter, it was summer. Just we had no air conditioning, of course, in the, uh, where we worked, so the summers were hot. Uh, windows were open all the time. We dressed to be comfortable.

In the wintertime, of course, we had heat here. The buildings were comfortable. It was the summers that were uncomfortable.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what colors the Great Hall, what paint colors they were, there were?

STICKLE: Uh, no. I remember the great, big windows. we had a lot of great, big windows there. And I guess the walls were probably painted institutional brown or tan

or green or something. I don't recall, really, what the colors were. They were not brilliant. They were not decorator colors, let's put it that way.

SIGRIST: And you said everything was looking a little shabby. At least the other buildings.

STICKLE: Yes, the other buildings were very shabby.

SIGRIST: So, really, you had no communication with any of the other staff. You all pretty much kept to yourself.

STICKLE: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you know if there were any other WPA projects going on at the island at that time?

STICKLE: Not at that time. We were the project and, as I said, there was, the Immigration and Naturalization Service had something going, but I don't know what they were doing.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kind of typewriter you typed on?

STICKLE: Yes. I typed on a Royal. (she laughs) It was a manual typewriter. It was a Royal, and that was the typewriter that we, uh, we used.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me what kind of information you were taking off of the manifests and putting onto the, into the index cards?

STICKLE: Okay. The manifests, as I say, were huge. Uh, in the manifests were the family names, usually the name of the father or the head of the family would be at the top of the, of the group, and then beneath that would be the name of his wife and children, and there were many children in these families. There were sometimes ten or twelve or fourteen kids coming over. The names, this was all handwritten in really lovely handwriting. The date of birth of the members of the family, where they came from, the name of the ship that they, uh, were on when they came over, and what their destination was. And this was all written out in longhand on these great big, huge ledgers and books.

SIGRIST: And you would have to type everything verbatim, what was on there?

STICKLE: What was on. If we had questions about the names, because they were, uh, some names were very difficult to decipher, we had reference to our supervisor.

That's what the supervisor was there for, to help us decipher some of these long Russian, Polish, Italian names, you know. And, uh, people were sometimes knowledgeable and said, "Oh, yes, I know, I am of Polish extraction, I can figure out what this name is," or something like that. So, uh, sometimes we didn't get the right names. And then we had a code system, you see. Each set of letters was represented by a code so that instead of the long name on the card there would be a code number, which then was checked by the supervisor to be sure that it was a, uh, correct code.

SIGRIST: Do you know what the ultimate destination of the index cards, where they were going to go, when you finished?

STICKLE: Well, at that time we did not know what would happen with them. I do know now, and I found out fairly recently, that they are in the archives in Washington, DC, that they had been microfilmed. Whether the actual card still exists, I don't know, but they are on microfilm in the archives and they are accessible to, uh, the public.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how many you had to produce in a day?

STICKLE: Uh, several hundred. I mean, we were expected to work. We weren't there to fool around and play. We would have a quota. I'd say maybe two hundred. I'm just pulling a number out of the air. But it was, it was constant work. I mean, it was about two hundred, I'd say, a day.

SIGRIST: What were your hours here on the island? From . . .

STICKLE: From about nine to five, five days a week, uh, Monday to Friday, with, I think we had a half hour or an hour for lunch. I don't remember any more. And there would be a break in the morning where we could use the facilities, you know, the, uh, ladies room, the men's room, or stop for coffee or something like that in the morning, a little snack.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, for instance, at Christmas time, if there was any kind of Christmas celebration here or something, some kind of a party or some sort of celebration, holiday?

STICKLE: If there was, it was spontaneous. It was somebody would bring in a cake or cookies or something, and we had that with our coffee. I do remember on, uh, the 17th of March, St. Patrick's Day, everybody, whether

they were Irish or whatever, white or black, came in wearing green. I mean, this was, this was the, uh, the thing. But other than that we had our religious holidays off, of course, but everything was sort of a spontaneous thing. There was nothing that had been planned for any special occasion.

SIGRIST: Are your parents working at this time?

STICKLE: Were they working?

SIGRIST: Did they have jobs outside?

STICKLE: My mother was a homebody. She stayed home to take care of the family, quote/unquote. My father was working and, um, he was the support of the family beside what us kids brought into the house.

SIGRIST: I see. And while you're working, is your sister too young to be working?

STICKLE: Uh, my sister, when I was working here my sister was still at school. She's almost six years younger than I am. She was still a schoolgirl when I was working here. And my brother, I think, had probably just graduated high school and was starting to, uh, do some sort of work.

SIGRIST: I was just trying to get sort of an economic picture of the family. Um, well, tell me a little bit then, you were here for about two years.

STICKLE: Right.

SIGRIST: Tell me how the job ended, why you left.

STICKLE: The job ended because they were starting to phase out the WPA. Uh, I think we were, I don't know whether prosperity had hit us yet, I don't recall, but the war, we were starting to work up to almost a war economy. The war had started in Europe. Industry was starting to pick up with a war economy, and we were just phased out. It was considered no longer necessary, whether the WPA went on afterwards or not, I don't know. I got a job elsewhere when I was finished with this one. Uh, we were phased out slowly. Uh, not all at one time, a group at a time. We got what they called a pink slip. And you dreaded to see, when you got your paycheck or whatever the pay envelope was, whether you had that pink slip in, because you knew that you were, this was the end of the job for you, and it was phased out gradually over a period of time.

SIGRIST: Did you catch on soon enough where you got another job before you were let go here, or . . .

STICKLE: No, no.

SIGRIST: You were let go here.

STICKLE: I was let go here, and then I had to find another job, and I did. And that paid me the magnificent sum of about eighteen dollars a week at the time.

SIGRIST: Was there anything about working at this job that you really didn't like?

STICKLE: Uh . . .

SIGRIST: You paint a very rosy picture of it all.

STICKLE: Well, um, that I didn't like? I think that we were, I can't recall at the moment, there were people, of course, not everybody was great. There were people who were unpleasant. There were little feelings of antagonism between or among the people, but, uh, this was more or less superficial. It didn't go down far. I can remember a happy time here because I met nice people here, and I had a, and we were friends, we had a happy time here. The thing that was touchy was the

anticipation that this job would be over, and we never knew when it would be. So, uh, that's all I can tell you. I mean, we were racially mixed at the time. We were Caucasians, we were blacks, and everybody got along really quite nicely. There was no feeling that I could anticipate unless I was just a very young girl and didn't know about these things at the time.

SIGRIST: Well, as you said, they were mostly young people.

STICKLE: We were young people, yes.

SIGRIST: With similar circumstances to you.

STICKLE: Uh-huh. And I have with me, I will show you pictures of the group of us who became friends, and we were really very a nice group. There were one or two older people. There was one elderly gentleman, I remember, who used to be, he would get the books, carry the books from where they were stacked and put them on the table for us. He was a very, he was the only person, I thought he was elderly then, he was probably fifty. But other than that it was really a very pleasant experience. I enjoyed it.

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

STICKLE: Okay.

SIGRIST: You certainly are one of the most unique employees that we've ever interviewed.

STICKLE: Uh-huh. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Who worked at Ellis Island. It was great. Anyway, this is Paul Sigrist signing off with Lillian Stickle on Tuesday, September 14, 1993. Thank you very much.

STICKLE: Thank you very much, Paul. I'm glad to be able to do this. It's quite exciting for me.