

EI-004

LOUIS STOLLER (LEON STOLEAR)

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ROUMANIA, 1930

AGE 18

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist with the National Park Service. We're here at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum with Louis Stoller, who came from Roumania in 1930 when he was eighteen years old. Mr. Stoller, could you please tell me your full name, where and when you were born.

STOLLER: I was born in a town named Soroki, which is in Bessarabia, part of a country that was tossed around between Roumania and Russia. My full name, as I said, is Louis Stoller, presently. My name in Roumania was Leon Stolear.

SIGRIST: Spell that, please.

STOLLER: It's spelled S-U, S-T-O-L-E-A-R. Today it's spelled S-T-O-L-L-E-R. I also had a Russian name, which was Lova

Stolear. From then on I was in the United States.

SIGRIST: Okay. And what was your date of birth, please?

STOLLER: November 27, 1913.

SIGRIST: Okay. Let's talk a little bit about your parents. What did your father do, what did your mother do?

STOLLER: My father was a barber in Soroki. He had a pretty good sized barber shop with three mirrors and himself and two employees. Eventually one of my brothers became a partner. He also became a barber. So they had the two of them plus an employee. And it was rough making a living. We were a family of eight. Four brothers and four sisters. I was one, the last one before the youngest. Anything else you'd like to know?

SIGRIST: Oh, yeah. Let's see. Can you talk about your mother a little bit?

STOLLER: Oh, yes. My mother was a saint. She was one of the finest ladies anyone can have. Very, very honest, always giving of herself, feeding people that were, didn't have what to eat, which was very common in that part of the country, and all in all I worshipped her. And each one of the kids had a nickname. And my name was called, which is in Hebrew, Urtza. Urtza is a treasure. She called me a treasure, and I was very, very proud

of it, and I, as the family emigrated to the United States I was left like the breadwinner because only we were left, my mother, three sisters and myself were left here. At that time I had a brother, a sister, my oldest brother and oldest sister were here. They're the first ones that came to this country. After that my father and one brother came here. After that my sister Nita and I came here.

SIGRIST: I see.

STOLLER: After that my mother and my two sisters which I had left came here. That completed the family.

SIGRIST: The whole cycle. (he laughs)

STOLLER: That completed the family.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about where you lived. Did you live in an apartment, in a house? What was it like?

STOLLER: There was no such thing as apartments. Mostly there were houses. I lived in a house that was rented. My father used to rent it from somebody who had the house next door to us. The place was, Soroki was in a valley, and near the river Dniester, spelled one way, in Roumanian it's spelled Niustru, which is N-I-U-S-T-R-U. Niustru. And that divided Soroki from Ukraine. The town on the opposite side of the river was called

Zichinuvka. It was a short span. I'd say a quarter of a mile, less than a quarter of a mile. The width of that river at that point. That river emptied to the Danube. Of course we had no plumbing in the house. It was an outhouse with two partitions, which was pretty rough going out there in the wintertime, and we had some very, very cold winters. And along side of it was a garbage place where we'd throw the garbage in there. And every now and then they would, people would come and clean it, and that's how we lived there.

SIGRIST: Did you have electricity in the house or was there gaslight?

STOLLER: We had electricity. We had electricity that used to be cut off at twelve o'clock midnight, up till twelve. After twelve there was no more electricity. And for, we also used to have a little pot so if, when it was real cold and you didn't have to go badly you used the pot.

SIGRIST: I see. Was your father's barber shop near where you lived?

STOLLER: Yes. The whole town was not big, and there was close to where we lived. And then the walking distance maybe a few minutes.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you keep animals at all?

STOLLER: We had two dogs at one time, and they eventually died. And when they died we buried them right in the back of the house.

SIGRIST: I see. Now, did your mother do the cooking or the sisters?

STOLLER: My mother cooked all the time. She was a wonderful cook.

SIGRIST: What was your favorite dish that she made?

STOLLER: My favorite dish was, believe it or not, hamburger. That was my favorite dish. But I always liked cake, and she used to make delicious cakes, very good cakes. And she used to bake on a Friday, and Jewish people used challah, which is a twisted bread.

SIGRIST: Yeah, a wonderful bread.

STOLLER: So she used to make that on a Friday, in the morning. And then she would prepare regular bread for the rest of the week. For some reason either we were so hungry that we didn't care or it stayed fresh the rest of the week. Plus the fact she would make all sorts of pancakes, potato pancakes. Oh, what she

didn't make.

SIGRIST: Did she enjoy cooking?

STOLLER: Oh!

SIGRIST: Or was this kind of a task?

STOLLER: She loved it.

SIGRIST: She did like it.

STOLLER: She loved it.

SIGRIST: I see.

STOLLER: And primarily I think the reason was that she loved the family, she loved the kids. The children, her husband, the children and living, getting, seeing everybody, getting along was all she wanted in life.

SIGRIST: I see. Speaking of the children, could you list or just run off all your brothers and sisters for me?

STOLLER: Of course, sure. My oldest brother was Sam. The next was a sister, Rose. By the way, Sam has died a few years ago at the age of eighty-four. I do, my older sister just passed ninety. She's here, and she's doing fine. She's doing very well. And after that was a brother, Boris. He was a renegade.

SIGRIST: Every family's got one.

STOLLER: We got one. He did not come along with us. He was the only one that remained in Roumania. After him was Ted. He came with my father to this country. After that, after Ted came Nita. Her Russian name was Nunja. Here it's called Nita.

SIGRIST: N-I-T-A, Nita?

STOLLER: That's right. And after that came my sister Anna. After that came I. And after that my younger sister Sara which unfortunately she was the first one to die in the family, the youngest one. She died of an aneurism of her brain in 1970.

SIGRIST: I see. Okay. Let's talk a little bit then about who decided to go to America and why.

STOLLER: Well, my brother, my older brother and my older sister didn't like living in Soroki. It was a dull town. There was nothing there.

SIGRIST: There was nothing to do.

STOLLER: They did have some education. We had, the highest education you were able to get in Soroki was high school. After that you had to go leave Soroki. And it was impossible to support anybody living out of the city. My father was a barber.

He hardly made ends meet to care for a family that size. So they decided they'd leave for America and they'd, they'd gotten as far as Paris and they stayed there fore a while.

SIGRIST: This is your brother and your sister.

STOLLER: My brother and my sister.

SIGRIST: How did they go to Paris?

STOLLER: By ship.

SIGRIST: By ship.

STOLLER: By ship, yes. And there was a lot of problem getting it and getting on because there were restrictions, but they got out. Paying off was very, very common there, and if you paid off you got it. To give you an idea, I got my driver's license in a place called Chernovtsy, which is Bocavina, which is part of Roumania. And I got my driver's license there on a Friday. And when I wanted the license they said, "No. You're not going to get it before Monday, because we don't work Saturday." Although they work Saturday he said, "You can't get it till Monday." Well, one of the, took 500 leis. Their currency is leis, L-E-I. So it cost me 500 leis. I got there, and off I went. I went. I saved myself two days' stay in Chernovtsy. So they finally got here. And when they got here they, in those

days there was such a thing as Landspeople, people that came from the same part of the country that you've known for many, many years.

SIGRIST: And what was the term that you used?

STOLLER: Landsmen.

SIGRIST: Oh, oh, I see.

STOLLER: A landsmen.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see. Right, right. Okay.

STOLLER: And so they got in touch with some of these landspeople, and they found that, they found some people in Pittsburgh that were very nice and helped them. And, my brother being a barber, he started working as a barber shop. And my sister got a job in an office. And they were getting along.

SIGRIST: Was this a long time before you came?

STOLLER: Oh, yes. Quite a long time.

SIGRIST: Do you know what year it was?

STOLLER: I would say they probably were here, I'll take a guess, about '18, '19. That's when I left, they left. And from then on they were here, they were in this country quite a few

years.

SIGRIST: Yeah. That's over ten years before you came.

STOLLER: Yes, about that, yes. And then eventually my father decided, and rather, not so much he as my brother and sister in America decided that they'd better get out of Soroki. So my brother Ted and my father were the next ones to come here.

SIGRIST: Now, how did they pay for the trip?

STOLLER: My brother Sam, the oldest brother . . .

SIGRIST: Who is in Pittsburgh.

STOLLER: Who is in Pittsburgh. He had borrowed some money from another landmen. The closeness among people was much better than it is today.

SIGRIST: Sure, sure. It's like this network.

STOLLER: Network. And they had societies that would help you, all ways of helping people to get out. So how he got it, I know he had saved some money, plus what he borrowed, he sent the money to, for the ship's, the what you call it, to pay for the . . .

SIGRIST: The passage.

STOLLER: Passage. Yeah.

SIGRIST: So your father and . . .

STOLLER: Brother Ted . . .

SIGRIST: And your brother Ted.

STOLLER: Were the next ones to arrive here.

SIGRIST: And how, what year was that, do you think?

STOLLER: Oh, not too much. I would say they, I came here in '30. They must have been here in about '27. It took about that long to get here.

SIGRIST: And did they do the same route to Paris and then over, or how . . .

STOLLER: No. Then they came direct from, I believe was Cherbourg, to New York.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you remember the boat they were traveling on?

STOLLER: That I wouldn't know. That I wouldn't know.

SIGRIST: All right. So they got to America.

STOLLER: They got to America, and again my father knew a

landsman also that had a barber shop on Eleventh Street between Avenue B and Avenue C. So he took him in to help him.

SIGRIST: So he stayed in New York as opposed to going to Pittsburgh.

STOLLER: He stayed in New York, he stayed in New York. And so did my brother Ted. He stayed in New York for a little while. So they worked for a while and they accumulated a little money.

By the way, our first flat was at 626 East 11th Street, which is a cold water flat. There was no hot water. As I told you, I came here on December 20th, which was quite cold. So the only way we get a little heat was my father would run off in the morning and make the stove in the kitchen to get a little heat in the apartment.

SIGRIST: So now did your father then send money . . .

STOLLER: Then between my father and my two brothers, they sent money to get me and my sister Nita here.

SIGRIST: And your mother, too. Or she came . . .

STOLLER: Nope, she came, she came later.

SIGRIST: Right, the next.

STOLLER: She was the last, she and two sisters were the last

ones to come here.

SIGRIST: Well, now, do you remember, was it your mother that told you you were going to America? Do you remember . . .

STOLLER: No. My mother was a very simple lady, and she believed that anybody with more knowledge would make decisions better than she does. And between my brother they had, they had some education. My brother Sam, the oldest one, and my sister Rose, they felt that we should come over, especially my brother Sam. He wanted everybody here. So they sent us money and my sister, they couldn't do too much. They paid for two of us. So my sister and I came here.

SIGRIST: And where did you leave from? What port did you leave from?

STOLLER: We left from Genoa, Genoa, Italy.

SIGRIST: So how did you get to Genoa?

STOLLER: Now, that's a big problem, a big problem. In the first place, we were in Bucharest. There's a company called the HIAS. That's the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. They took charge of us. And we met in Bucharest. We got to Bucharest.

SIGRIST: How did you get to Bucharest?

STOLLER: Well, that was, that was simple. We'd take the train.

We went to a place called Bel'tsy, and from Bel'tsy, by train, by horse and wagon to Bel'tsy, and from Bel'tsy, or by bus, to Bucharest. And Bucharest I met my present wife with her family.

She had, at that time she had two brothers and a mother and father. They were a family of five. I forgot to tell you, while being in Bucharest a doctor examined me, and he found something wrong with my eyes. And they kept me back for five days for treatments in the eye.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you remember what the treatments were?

STOLLER: Yes. It was a thing called trachoma.

SIGRIST: Trachoma, yes.

STOLLER: Trachoma. And after giving me treatments for five days I was considered cured.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the treatment was, what they put in your eyes?

STOLLER: Yes, I sure did. There were no drops. Alum.

SIGRIST: Yes.

STOLLER: And bluestone.

SIGRIST: Yes.

STOLLER: That's what they used.

SIGRIST: Did it hurt?

STOLLER: And that burned! (Mr. Sigrist laughs) I was glad when they gave me, well, first they put the alum.

SIGRIST: Yes. Which is a powder, right?

STOLLER: No, no. It comes in a stick.

SIGRIST: I see.

STOLLER: They smeared it around here and there, and then they put the bluestone, which hurts badly. But you take it. So after five days everything was fine. That's what they claimed, and we were ready to go. And that's when we met these, the Bussen family, and they checked them out. They found them fine. From there we got a train to go from there, from Bucharest to Genoa.

SIGRIST: This is a long train ride.

STOLLER: It's a long train ride. We went to Yugoslavia. I remember we changed trains about midnight, and it was dark, cold, nothing there. And we had to take all the baggage from

one side to the other, and it was a mess. With the second train we went direct to Genoa. We changed trains in a place called Jimbolia. I believe that was Yugoslavia. From there we continued to Genoa. When we got to Genoa everything seemed to be okay. However, they have a doctor there, an American doctor, that examines you before you board the ship. And he checked me out, fine, okay. Then the Bussen family comes. They find three of them, something wrong with their eyes. And the whole, they send the whole caboodle back to Bucharest from Genoa.

SIGRIST: Oh, dear.

STOLLER: And here my sister and I are on board this big vessel called Conte Grande. That was the ship we came one.

SIGRIST: Say that again, please?

STOLLER: Conte Grande.

SIGRIST: C-O-N-T-E. Conte?

STOLLER: Yeah. C-O-N-T-E, Grande. And the Bussen family rented a little rowboat, and as we were leaving in the big ship and they were running around with the small boat, and you can imagine tears galore on both sides. But fortunately they got, they went back and after they treated them, and they had some pull and so on and so forth, they got on another ship and they

landed in Providence, and they got here.

SIGRIST: I see. So how long were you in Genoa before you got on?

STOLLER: Only about three days.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you stay in a hotel, or . . .

STOLLER: Yes. I must say this HIAS was very, very involved in that. And they put us up and made sure that we had enough to eat and so on and so forth. So . . .

SIGRIST: Okay. So you boarded the Conte Grande.

STOLLER: The Conte Grande.

SIGRIST: And what class were you traveling?

STOLLER: Fourth.

SIGRIST: Steerage.

STOLLER: Down. (they laugh) So we came here, and it was on a weekend. So they kept us over.

SIGRIST: No, wait. Let's not get here yet.

STOLLER: Sure.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about the journey over.

STOLLER: The journey over took nine days.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Was it rough, or was it smooth sailing?

STOLLER: Most of it was smooth. A little here and there, my sister was sick. I wasn't.

SIGRIST: Were there, were you traveling with lots of people? Were there a lot of people there?

STOLLER: There were lots of people and unfortunately there was nobody that I could converse with that would ask a question and get an answer.

SIGRIST: Why was that?

STOLLER: Because of the language barrier.

SIGRIST: I see. So these were people from all over.

STOLLER: Now, like I met one man, he had a bottle of whiskey. And he kept on taking it more and more, and he offered some to me. And I said, "I don't drink." He says, "I like it. I like it, you're going to like it." What he meant by liking, I don't know what liking means. So it was nobody. I met a man. I remember his name. His name was Torosian. He was an Armenian.

He was traveling. He spoke English some. But it didn't do me any good because I didn't speak English. But sign language, we got long much better than with other people.

SIGRIST: I see.

STOLLER: Also most people spoke Italian.

SIGRIST: Oh, of course, you left from Genoa.

STOLLER: From Genoa. And I couldn't speak Italian either, although it's a Romance language, some of the words remain similar, but not enough to have a conversation or to ask a question to get a decent answer.

SIGRIST: What, do you remember the food on the boat?

STOLLER: The food wasn't bad, it wasn't bad.

SIGRIST: Did you eat in a dining room, or did they just serve it down . . .

STOLLER: No, it was a dining room. We ate in the dining room. and I remember the first time I saw bananas. And we never saw bananas in Roumania. Where I come from in Roumania, in Soroki, was no bananas. And we looked at it and looked at it until we saw somebody eating it. And we said, "Well, if they eat it, I'm going to eat it, fine." I tasted it, and it was good. So I

realized that was good. So the trip across wasn't bad.

SIGRIST: You said nine days.

STOLLER: Nine days.

SIGRIST: Nine days. All right. So you then came to New York Harbor I guess, right.

STOLLER: Then come to New York Harbor.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty at all?

STOLLER: Ah, when we see, we saw the Statue of Liberty? Want me to stop? (referring to sound engineer gesturing)

SIGRIST: No. He's just saying five minutes.

STOLLER: Everybody got to one side of the ship to see the Statue of Liberty, and oh, there was howls and screams and, "America, I love you." Everybody in his own language, and so on and so forth. It was a celebration, considering from the nasty place that I came from, you, knowing what my brothers and my father and my mother, rather sisters, were here, I knew what we can expect compared with what we had.

SIGRIST: Sure, sure.

STOLLER: So it was the, you can't. It's very hard for me to

tell it to you. Certain things in life you have to live. You have to live them to appreciate them, and we lived it, and boy, I appreciated it.

SIGRIST: Well, in our final few minutes, tell me a little bit about being at Ellis. Like, for instance, what did you think when you saw this great big building?

STOLLER: You were very suspicious. When we got there we were very suspicious. You, now, the first place, on the ship, they put tags on us.

SIGRIST: Yes.

STOLLER: Now, my tag said, "E.I." Other tags said something else. Because first class, then I found out the first class passengers, the second class passengers, they were let go. We want. Now, what is "E.I.?" I asked this one, asked people, they don't know what is E.I. And then they had some other tags. "What is it? What is it?" See if you, maybe you're a criminal or something, although we were absolutely legal. Then I found out what E.I. stands for. "Ellis Island." (Mr. Sigrist laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, how are you to know?

STOLLER: When there's nobody there to tell you, where are you

going to go? Well, we came to Ellis Island after staying in a boat. A small boat picked us up at the ship and took us into Ellis Island. And we get to Ellis Island there was a place to put the baggage in. The inspector's there. And we were, before we walked over to the inspector we had a number that, because the stations were numbered, each inspector, so you knew that you were going to this inspector's booth. And of course, again, the language barrier and they gave me, I remember a fellow that spoke Yiddish, and I spoke to him in Yiddish because nobody, he didn't know Roumanian.

SIGRIST: Was the HIAS represented here, too?

STOLLER: Nope. After we left, after we left Genoa they were finished with us. They didn't pick us up here. And that's what it was. Two more? So we, when I saw, when the ship was docked I believe it was around 23rd Street.

SIGRIST: Yes, sure.

STOLLER: And my brother, I saw my brother Sunday. We waved at each other because, see, they wouldn't let him up on the ship. So then . . .

SIGRIST: This is before they brought you here. Before the boat . . .

STOLLER: Yeah. Just from far away. Then he brought us here. My father and my brother came, and they picked me up.

SIGRIST: Then they came to Ellis Island.

STOLLER: Yeah. Came to Ellis Island, took us off. And my brother and my sister, and we were home.

SIGRIST: And you were here for how long, you said, probably?

STOLLER: Here? Only a day.

SIGRIST: Just a day.

STOLLER: Right. We spent the day.

SIGRIST: Did they feed you here at all?

STOLLER: Yes, yes. They gave sandwiches and coffee and tea, whatever you wanted. It was very nice. People were very friendly. It's just that the fact that we were suspicious. Somebody, maybe I'm doing something wrong, I'm saying something wrong. And you worry about it. Being, coming from a country where we came from it's not unusual.

SIGRIST: Right.

STOLLER: I imagine everybody else felt the same way.

SIGRIST: All right. Just, very quickly, where did you go after you left Ellis? You went to the 11th Street apartment, or . . .

STOLLER: We went to that 11th Street apartment. We stayed there about three months. And whenever we got an apartment at 647 East 11th Street on the corner of Avenue C. That one had heat and a toilet, an inside toilet, which was in the kitchen, unfortunately.

SIGRIST: At least it was there.

STOLLER: It was there. So it was heaven.

SIGRIST: I see. And then when did your mother come over?

STOLLER: Oh, about two years later.

SIGRIST: I see.

STOLLER: My mother and my two sisters, they were the last ones here, and I have some pictures when we were at Kennedy Airport where they come, they flew in. That is, when we took them from there to show them Kennedy Airport, so we have some pictures of the airplane.

SIGRIST: Well, do you have just a, since we're probably just about out of time, do you have just something you want to sum up and say before he turns off the machine?

STOLLER: Well, I can tell you I'm seventy-seven years old. I came here when I was six, eighteen. The country has been good to me. America, I love you.

SIGRIST: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Stoller. Thank you for giving us the interview.

STOLLER: You're very welcome.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist. It's Wednesday, September 5, 1990 for the National Park Service signing off.