

EI-048

SYLVIA NOVACK BELLOVIN

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POLAND, 1929

AGE 5

RESIDENCE: BREZINE

RESIDENCE IN US: BROOKLYN, NY

PORT: DANZIG

SIGRIST: Good morning, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, May 15th, 1991. We are here at Ellis Island with Sylvia Bellovin, who came from Poland in 1929, when she was five-and-a-half years old. Good morning.

BELLOVIN: Good morning.

SIGRIST: Could you please give me your full name, and include your maiden name in that, and your date of birth, please.

BELLOVIN: My name is Sylvia Novack Bellovin, and I was born on

March 17th, 1924.

SIGRIST: And could you spell Novack for us, please.

BELLOVIN: N-O-V-A-C-K.

SIGRIST: I see. I'll be asking you to spell things from time to time. Where were you born?

BELLOVIN: I was born in a small town near Lodz, L-O-D-Z, a big town in Poland, and I was born about a half hour's ride from there.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the town?

BELLOVIN: Brezine. B-R-E-Z-I-N-E.

SIGRIST: Can you describe this town for me?

BELLOVIN: It was a town that I remember as being mostly cobblestones, at least the area that I lived in. The thing that comes to mind is a courtyard of cobblestones, and we lived in a one room, my mother and I. Upstairs, you know, the upper apartment. And it served as a kitchen, bedroom, living room, everything, that bizarre place that we lived in, that

I remember.

SIGRIST: What kind of things did you have in this one room?

BELLOVIN: Well, we had the beds. I slept in a big bed with my mother. We had a chair and a table. A chair to sit in, as a sitting chair, and a table with two chairs, because there was only my mother and I. I mentioned the fact originally, and let me clarify it, that I came here with my brother. Actually, he was my half-brother. My father had been married prior to his marriage to my mother, and it was only at the time that we were leaving that my father asked my mother to allow my brother to come with us, because, for personal reasons, he felt he would have a better life here in the United States. So I was introduced to my half-brother at the time we left.

SIGRIST: Where did he live?

BELLOVIN: He lived in the same town, but our paths never crossed. I was quite young. He was five years older than I was, so.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

BELLOVIN: Irving, at the time.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about your father. What was his name?

BELLOVIN: His name was Abraham, and he was a tailor. His mother died when he was four years old, and his father remarried. There were, at the time there were three brothers aged two, four and six. He was the middle one. The two-year-old was the product of the marriage, the first marriage, my grandfather's first marriage, and he and his brother were born, they were twins. The other part of the twin died, and my grandmother, my paternal grandmother died at that time, too, in childbirth. So my grandfather was left with three boys. As I said, two, four and six. And he decided to remarry, and that's a story in and of itself.

SIGRIST: What did your grandfather do?

BELLOVIN: He was tailor, too. I mean, my father used to tell the story that we're Jewish and he would go to Hebrew school. Polish education was practically non-existent

at the time. And he would go to Hebrew school. And he was a very good student. At the age of eight he was told that he had to go to work, and he couldn't reach the table where they did their pressing. So they put a stool near the table. That part he used to tell us about. They used to put a stool near the table so he could reach. And that's where his education stopped, age eight.

SIGRIST: I see. Tell us a little about your grandfather remarrying.

BELLOVIN: Well, as I said, out of necessity raising, he had to work, and raising three boys, it was difficult, so he married my step-grandmother. And he then proceeded to have five children with her. (she laughs) I knew her, because they came to the United States after we did, and I knew her. She lived to a ripe old age of about ninety-five. And she was a rather mean person, very self-centered, and even her own children could not get along with her. If it weren't for my mother, who died very young, unfortunately, she would have no one who really cared for her. My mother happened to

have been a very good person, and my grandmother was very strict. There are tales.

SIGRIST: What was your grandfather like?

BELLOVIN: He seemed to be like, a man with a grey beard, the only way I remember him. A grey beard, very religious, and as a matter of fact, to digress for a moment, he came here after my father did, by himself. And he was very religious. He could not understand how people of the Jewish faith could leave the Jewish religion so flippantly, and how so many people lived outside their religion. So he insisted he couldn't live here, and he went back to Poland. He was brought here by my father and my uncle, my uncle, who's my father's older brother, brought my father here, and the two of them brought my grandfather here, before we were brought here. My father contributed to the financial end of it. My uncle, who came here when he was quite young, of course, he ran away from home long before my father ever left, and when he came to the United States he sent for my father, then the two of them sent for my grandfather. They paid his fare back

to Poland. And then, within six months, he decided it wasn't all he thought it was. You know, when you're away from someplace, you think it's glorious and wonderful. And so, within six months, he said, "Take me back to the United States," and he came back. And then he worked and got his family. You know, the, actually two remained in Poland and, of course, Hitler took care of them. My father's younger brother refused to leave his wife and children, and my grandmother, my step-grandmother's youngest son was also married, refused to leave. So those two remained and, of course, after Hitler went into Poland that was the last we heard from them.

SIGRIST: How did your father get along with his stepmother?

BELLOVIN: Very poorly. As I said, food was a problem. Everything was a problem. And, as I said, I have a feeling it was not only with him; her own daughters, because there were four daughters that came to the United States with her, were equally upset by her.

SIGRIST: Just a nasty person.

BELLOVIN: Yeah. The proverbial stepmother. (they laugh)
But, as I said, she was that way with her own children
too. That's not nice to say about the dead, right?

SIGRIST: When did your father come?

BELLOVIN: My father came here in October 1923.

SIGRIST: Why?

BELLOVIN: Well, anti-Semitism was not a figment of anyone's
imagination. It was fact. We lived in the ghetto,
and basically we were delegated, relegated, to a
certain area. And there was very little that people
could do to get out of their financial and
circumstances.

SIGRIST: I see. Did your father ever, I mean, was he ever the
victim of any kind of anti-Semitic . . .

BELLOVIN: Well, he used to talk about it. He mentioned that he
wasn't allowed to go to any of the schools that, I
mean, later on he, in his day and age, it wasn't, it
was really bad. But later on I know my aunt who,
that's my aunt from the second marriage, my

grandfather's second marriage, his half-sister, did have an education, I know that. But none of the others did.

SIGRIST: I see. So, and he left in '23, you said?

BELLOVIN: Yes. 1923.

SIGRIST: This is before you are born.

BELLOVIN: Yes. My mother was in her third month. As a matter of fact, I don't know if I should say this, but when I first found out about the facts of life, I decided to color the facts a bit because my parents could not have indulged in the sexual experience to give birth even to me. So I lied. I said my father came here in March of 1923. But of course the facts prove otherwise. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: I see. What did he do when he got here?

BELLOVIN: He became a tailor again.

SIGRIST: In New York?

BELLOVIN: In New York. My father was a very progressive

thinker. He was very bright, but never availed himself of an education because he was just too busy making a living making sure that we had enough, and I've always maintained, I've told this to my children, that you don't know it, but your mother brought the Depression here. Because October 1929, if you know, that was the time of the crash! And did you know I brought it? (they laugh) So I've often said that, so it was hard. My father had an apartment for us in Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: Where did he live when he first came?

BELLOVIN: When he first came he decided to live in The Bronx because of a lot of people that he knew lived in The Bronx.

SIGRIST: Did his brother live with him?

BELLOVIN: No. His brother lived in Brooklyn. He had a house in Canarsie. But he and his brother had very different views on what is important and what isn't important, as I said. My father was very progressive thinker. He was on the picket lines. He was a

very . . .

SIGRIST: A real trooper.

BELLOVIN: Right. He was a union organizer, that kind of thing. And he got into a lot of trouble that way. But his brother wasn't, and they decided it would be best to live apart. But at one point in time my father wasn't able to earn too much, so my uncle asked him if he would like to join him in Canarsie. And at that time Canarsie was dirt roads and goats and no sewers, and the lack of sewers was very pronounced to the nostrils. So my father went to live with him for a period of time. And the story goes that my mother, when he wrote to my mother saying, "I'm now living in Canarsie." And my mother's reply, this, of course, I heard, I mean, I didn't know that my mother was writing this letter, but afterwards it used to be thrown up to my mother that she wrote this in a letter, and she said, "My dear husband, you're so far away from me now, must you move now to a place called Canarsie?" She thought it was another, the end of the world.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about life with your mother while your father's over here.

BELLOVIN: Well, I was very much the center of everything. Not only for my mother, but for my step-grandmother. Because, by that time, my grandfather was in the United States for my four aunts. So another female, but all the females around me. And, uh, I was very much a princess, and led the life of a princess, taken care of, sheltered, and I guess no harm or anything ever came to me, because they were all there. And also my mother's family, who perished with Hitler, except for one cousin, is also very good to us.

SIGRIST: So there was a big extended family in this little town.

BELLOVIN: Well, my mother's family was also very caring of her because she lost her parents when she was quite young. And they felt that, let's put it this way; very often people who did what my father did, left for financial and religious reasons, once they came to the United States and they had to wait to become citizens in order to bring the rest of the family over, they got

lonely, and in their loneliness they forgot about their families, and started new families here in the United States. So this was very much uppermost in my mother's mind, in her family's minds, too. They thought that this, too, might be her destination, things that could happen to her. And I've known of cases like that. When I came here an aunt of mine, it happened to. My father, actually it was my father's mother's sister. She had three children, and her husband left for the United States, and he sent for the three children, but he never sent for his wife. And afterwards the children got, as they got older, they got together and they sent for their mother. She was a very bitter person because she felt deserted, neglected.

SIGRIST: And rightly so.

BELLOVIN: And rightly so. And, as I said, this was not an uncommon thing.

SIGRIST: So this is really in the back of your mother's mind.

BELLOVIN: Oh, definitely. Definitely.

SIGRIST: Was your father very good about writing to her?

BELLOVIN: Oh, yeah. Not only writing, but sending money whenever he had, you know, the money to send.

SIGRIST: Did your mother work?

BELLOVIN: No, no. She didn't work.

SIGRIST: So was that your sole means of support?

BELLOVIN: Yes, yes. But the American dollar went far and, as I said, he was very good that way. He sent the money, and that was our only way of survival.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about some domestic details. For instance, what did you eat?

BELLOVIN: Basically, we ate chicken. I mean, that was the meat part of it. We had potatoes, bread, a lot of that. I was a pretty chubby child, so I must have had enough to eat. I was also a sickly child, my mother used to tell me, because I had tonsillitis all the time. Now I call it tonsillitis. At the time all they did was said my tonsils were inflamed, and my father kept

saying, "Don't let them do anything there. Wait till she comes here." And that's exactly what happened. I do, I don't remember, but we were supposed to take an earlier boat to the United States. But they found out that I had an abscess tooth, and they were afraid that this would get to Danzig and, you know, they would send us back, because you get a pre-examination. And so we had to delay our departure and get different tickets for the trip so that they could remove the tooth in question.

SIGRIST: Well, and perhaps your being ill from time to time might explain some of the pampering, too, going on.

BELLOVIN: Yeah, probably. As a matter of fact, I came here when I was five-and-a-half, but I didn't start school until I was seven, because part of the problem of illness and tonsillectomy and all of that. So these are the things that did happen.

SIGRIST: As a child, explain to me a little bit about how you worshipped. You know, what was your religious life like?

BELLOVIN: Well, the religious life was the synagogue.

SIGRIST: There was a synagogue in town?

BELLOVIN: Oh, yeah. I would not, my mother was very religious, and maintained her religious beliefs when she came here, and continued to follow it. My father, on the other hand, became an atheist very early in his life. And it was a very interesting situation. He respected her beliefs, but he would not follow the dictates. But this was his belief and she let him go his way. She went her way, and it was a very interesting relationship.

SIGRIST: Do you remember at all any kind of religious celebrations in Poland? Do you remember, for instance, a Passover, that sticks in your mind, or . . .

BELLOVIN: Well, the Passover was there. But more the Passovers that my grandparents had when we came here was more of a celebration. Because you must remember one thing: food was at a premium, okay. We didn't have that much, and getting the whole clan together and feeding

all of them from one pocket was an impossibility. So, and the men, the two important men, like my father and his father, were here. And so that immediately negated most of the religious celebrations. But the synagogue was a very definite point and, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Can you describe it a little bit for me?

BELLOVIN: Well, I don't remember that too much, because I wasn't part of it. Had I been a boy, yes. Females, my aunts took care of me, my mother went because, as I said, she was very religious. Her father had been very religious, her whole family. My mother's brother was a rabbi. So, you know, this was all part of my mother's upbringing, and she was very religious. But as far as my early religious training, there was none.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk a little bit, then, about your father sending the money over, and he sent your passage over. Do you remember your mother telling you, "We're going to America?"

BELLOVIN: Oh, yeah. That was a big thing, getting ready, and what should you take? I remember we had it for a long

time. I saw it outside, these wicker steamer trunks, you know. That's what we had. And, of course, the big thing was the down quilt that she brought with us. I'm still sleeping under one of them. It's been done and re-done and re-done many times over, but it still remains the quilt that my mother brought here. My father said, I remember this conversation going on time and again, "After the money I sent you, this is what you bring? A down quilt?" (she laughs) And a couple of silver pieces that she had accumulated, which I have now. A silver ladle and a couple of other things, but nothing of monetary value. The candlesticks I have. I have my mother's candlesticks. They were also my grandmother's candlesticks. Not my father's one, but my mother's one. She has that, and I now have it.

SIGRIST: Those are nice things to have.

BELLOVIN: Oh, yeah. I treasure them.

SIGRIST: So many people have nothing. All right. Well, let's talk about, so this was an exciting period, then, getting ready to go.

BELLOVIN: Oh, yes. Oh, definitely.

SIGRIST: What did "father" mean to you?

BELLOVIN: A picture.

SIGRIST: You had a photo.

BELLOVIN: Yeah, yeah. As a matter of fact, I brought it with me. It's a photo that he took. It must have been his marriage photo, because he still had hair. (she laughs) So, I never asked my mother, "When was this taken?", but I know it was a picture that he had here. And therefore, and he kept sending pictures, you know, after he got to the United States.

SIGRIST: What was more exciting to you as a five year old, coming to America, or seeing your father?

BELLOVIN: Well, seeing my father was a scary thing for me. Here is a man that was a picture all of my life, and suddenly he appears before me. And, of course, he appeared on the dock, as I said. He had, he thought we were coming a day later, somehow. I don't know why

we came a day earlier. And he wasn't there to greet us. That's how we ended up in Ellis Island. Otherwise we there wouldn't have been an Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: I see. We'll get to that when we, we're going chronologically. All right. Let's get you to the port that you left from. You left from this town in Poland, and you went to where?

BELLOVIN: We went to Danzig, now known as Gdansk.

SIGRIST: And how did you get there?

BELLOVIN: We got there by train.

SIGRIST: How did you get to the train?

BELLOVIN: First we took, I think it was a local carriage type thing to Lodz. Of course, from Brezine you couldn't get anything. But then from there, from Lodz, we took a train to Danzig.

SIGRIST: Did anyone go with you?

BELLOVIN: Just my mother and my half-brother.

SIGRIST: But no other family members?

BELLOVIN: No, no others.

SIGRIST: And how long did you stay in Danzig?

BELLOVIN: Just overnight. Just overnight. And, as I said, like so many other ports, I now realize, it was seedy-looking and it had many characters that weren't really nice. And we found out afterwards how un-nice they could be.

SIGRIST: Indeed. What was it like being a little girl in the big city?

BELLOVIN: Scary, because my whole life had been spent in this little secluded town except for the occasional departures for the doctor in Lodz. And we would just take that trip back and forth. But to be having to stay overnight in someone's, in the boarding house-type situation with strangers, only strangers. Nobody else was there except my mother and people that we had befriended on the train, and the boarding house that we went to. I don't remember very much of the boarding house. The whole thing is very vague to me,

because only the things that were scary to me remained in my mind.

SIGRIST: You said you befriended people on the train. Were these also people going on to America?

BELLOVIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did you all stay in the same boarding house?

BELLOVIN: Yes, more or less. I guess word of mouth gets around, and this is where you end up going. I don't know, there may have been other places, but I only knew of this one place that we were at.

SIGRIST: And was it in Danzig that the woman was hurt?

BELLOVIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Could you tell us a little bit about that, please.

BELLOVIN: Well, as I've said, you took your most important possessions with you, and my mother didn't have any important possessions other than candlesticks, which was in her trunk. And there was nothing. The ring I'm wearing today, which I wear all the time, is my

mother's wedding band, and that was the extent of her jewelry. She never had anything else, because any money that my father sent was spent on food and health-connected problems that may arise from time to time. So she didn't have anything that anybody would want. This other woman, on the other hand, wore jewelry on her. She figured . . .

SIGRIST: Who was this other woman? Was she someone you befriended on the train?

BELLOVIN: I don't even remember. Someone we befriended on the train. I didn't know her in any other way. I remember her as a heavy-set woman, and she was all alone. Didn't have children, brothers, nobody. She was going . . .

SIGRIST: Was she Polish?

BELLOVIN: She was Jewish. She was going to re-locate in the United States, and her husband had sent for her. There were no children involved. And she went out in the evening, and the next thing we knew she came back. She was a mess. Not only did they take her rings,

which came off easily enough, but she wore earrings, pierced earrings, and she was beaten, and the earrings had been torn from her ears. And to me this was the most upsetting incident I had ever experienced in all of my five-and-a-half years. And that picture returned to me very often. And she was black and blue, and she did not go on with us. I guess she had a lot of recuperating to do. So we never heard from her again.

SIGRIST: What's your mother thinking through all of this?

BELLOVIN: She was frightened, because here she knew that my grand, as I said, a very religious person, and here she heard my grandfather say that everything is irreligious in this United States, and he had come back and this was going through her mind. So she was very apprehensive.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Mixed feelings about the whole thing.

BELLOVIN: Well, it was not only that, but she had heard that my father wasn't religious any more, so he wasn't, she was wondering what lay in store for her. And it was

frightening for her, I imagine. She never spoke about it to any great extent, but she was really anxious.

SIGRIST: So you were overnight in Danzig, you said?

BELLOVIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And then you boarded . . .

BELLOVIN: A boat.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name?

BELLOVIN: No, I don't remember the name. It was a small boat, and it went to La Havre. And we used to refer to it as the small boat and the big boat. So I guess from La Havre, of course, we took the big boat. That was The Mexico.

SIGRIST: How long of a trip to La Havre was it?

BELLOVIN: I don't think it was very long. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Overnight?

BELLOVIN: I don't even remember sleeping on that boat.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, tell me about The Mexico. What was that like for a little girl?

BELLOVIN: Well, that was, to me, that was an unbelievable boat. Here I was a child that, I hate to say it, an upset stomach at the slightest provocation and everything that goes with it. Here I was in this big boat. My mother was, all I remember was she spent the entire time in the cabin deathly ill, seasick.

SIGRIST: You had your own cabin.

BELLOVIN: Oh, yeah. My brother and my mother and I. And she was just deathly ill. And it was scary to be left on my own, and I did. It was very exciting. I didn't experience any seasickness. And so I was on my own. My brother had his own itinerary and his own looking because, of course, to him this was a very unique situation. He had never met us before, and here he was going into a place that he had heard of, but to a father that he really didn't know very well. Not at all, really, because they had been divorced practically right after birth, after his birth. So it was, he went his way and I was just something that you

didn't look at very much.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: So if you were left on your own on the boat, what did you do?

BELLOVIN: Oh, I went exploring and looking. And I remember one thing. I don't know whether it's truth or fantasy, because we've taken, since I married, we've taken several cruises. And I remember at one point looking over the boat and seeing blood as if something got in the way of the propeller and that was the blood that I saw. So I don't know what it was. As I said, these were things that I remember seeing people on the deck and I was on my own.

SIGRIST: Were there other children?

BELLOVIN: I don't remember any other children. I guess I wasn't too friendly, because you must realize people came from various and sundry countries there. I mean, La Havre is, of course, in France, and I was from

Poland. I did not speak Polish. That shows you the sheltered life I led. I spoke only Yiddish. And so the communication was difficult. My brother, as I said, was on his own, and I was on my own. I would report regularly for food, etc. I don't even remember the dining room. All I remember is walking on my own on this boat, and feeling perfectly free.

SIGRIST: Did they have any kind of organized games?

BELLOVIN: No.

SIGRIST: Nothing like that.

BELLOVIN: Nothing like that. Nothing like that at all.

SIGRIST: How long was the trip?

BELLOVIN: I think it was about ten days. Which now, to, I think it's a rather good speed, considering that now it isn't much faster by comparison.

SIGRIST: Sure. Do you remember coming into New York Harbor and maybe seeing the Statue of Liberty?

BELLOVIN: Well, I didn't see the Statue of Liberty until we

left Ellis Island. Maybe because we were facing the wrong direction, or whatever the story was, but I don't remember seeing the Statue of Liberty until we left Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Explain to me what happened next. Did the boat dock in New York?

BELLOVIN: The boat docked, gangplank, you know, went down. And a lot of people exited at that point. But we had nobody there.

SIGRIST: Because your father hadn't come.

BELLOVIN: No. (she clears her throat) He didn't have a telephone, but they sent him a telegram, and he found it when he came home from work, and he came running down, but it was already too late. So I did see him, and my mother pointed him out to me. And the only thing I remember saying, "He looks just like my uncle," his younger brother, and he did. I remember saying, because I saw pictures of him, but the pictures somehow did not look like him. But he did look like my uncle, and I said, "He looks like my

uncle." And that was the one thing I remember.

SIGRIST: When he wasn't on the dock when the boat docked.

BELLOVIN: My mother thought . . .

SIGRIST: All her worst fears were validated.

BELLOVIN: You got it. You got it. She felt that, well, this was it. He finally deserted her. Now what's going to happen? Are they going to send her back, because the feel was always, "Are you going to be sent back?" Medical reason, nobody's there to pick you up. The various, you know, things that could be happening to you. And that was the big fear.

SIGRIST: Was your mother a rather stoic woman, or was she one to show her emotion?

BELLOVIN: No, she was a rather stoic woman, but this time I think she was frightened.

SIGRIST: Tell me what happened next.

BELLOVIN: Well, as I said, I was very, my mother, I think, was very happy. I was, well, he's there.

SIGRIST: When you finally saw him.

BELLOVIN: Right. But my mother was, of course, very pleased, but now we were going to Ellis Island. This presented new problems. I would have to be examined again, and the examination of the thing, I mean, my mother didn't think there was anything wrong with me. But one of the things that bothered her was that, uh, lice, strange as it may seem, was a problem. And she was fearful that if I had them they would shave my head. And here's this daughter, and I go in for the examination, and she's fearful because just as I was going in a little girl with blonde hair, long blonde hair. I had short hair, minus the grey, like my hair is now. And I was first to go in to see the doctor, and this little girl comes out minus her hair, bald. And my mother saw that and she started crying. "Oh, my God, look what's going to happen." I went in, and they found nothing wrong, so I came out. That made her feel better. Of course there were other things. I mean, showers. That was a scary thing for me. I never experienced a shower in my life. We bathed in a

tub. And a shower was something new, and here we were, all the women nude, and myself nude, and we were all taking this big, there was no privacy, there was nothing. It was one big shower, so to speak. You know, booths. So it was very uncomfortable.

SIGRIST: How did your mother feel about doing that?

SIGRIST: She wasn't very happy. She happened to be a very reserved religious person, and this was not her way of doing things. She did not like to expose herself, but this was a necessity.

SIGRIST: Explain to me through the eyes of a five-year-old what Ellis looked like.

BELLOVIN: Well, it was scary. First of all, the ceilings were very high. I never saw anything like it. There were cots, you know, to sleep on, because we were there overnight. There were people, you know, people that to us represent authority, policemen. They weren't policemen, but to us they were.

SIGRIST: The uniforms.

BELLOVIN: Yeah. So everything. We were very timid. We were very intimidated, and everything was frightening for us. My mother didn't help the situation. I think she was more frightened than I was. And, of course, this is contagious, and so I became frightened too.

SIGRIST: How about your step-brother? Was he sort of playing the man in the family?

BELLOVIN: He was. I mean, he was not going to show any fear, because this whole thing, I think, was for him, was even more scary than for me, you know. Now, in retrospect, when I think about it. Because here he was, going to a land that he never saw to a man that he knew nothing about, with a woman that was not related to him, with a young girl, a little girl who was his half-sister that he knew nothing about. I mean, how does he fit into this thing? And later in time it was a difficult time for him. He was rebellious and, as a matter of fact, I'm trying to locate him now again. Through a period of time we've made contact, but he's always running off and doing things. So we've never really had a close

relationship.

SIGRIST: So for him this was just an awful lot to deal with.

BELLOVIN: This was a traumatizing situation, and more than he could cope with.

SIGRIST: Talk about staying overnight here. Where did you stay?

BELLOVIN: As far as I can remember, we stayed here in Ellis Island in one of the cubicles.

SIGRIST: Were you with a lot of other people?

BELLOVIN: Yes. There were cots, as far as I can remember. And, as I said, this is something I'm not too sure of. Just a vague memory.

SIGRIST: Did you eat here?

BELLOVIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the dining facilities?

BELLOVIN: Big tables and benches.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, let's, tell me about how you finally got off the island.

BELLOVIN: Well, my father came and we were called and we did get off, and he came bright and early so we didn't have too much time. Because we left the boat, uh, took us there early evening, and so we only stayed overnight and early in the morning he was there and we were released.

SIGRIST: Describe the scene to me of your mother and father seeing each other, and you seeing your father.

BELLOVIN: Me, I was distant. This was a man, known as Father, but as far as I was concerned, he was a picture. I was very reticent. And my father always tried very hard to, you know, be friendly, and it was hard for me to adjust to that. I was used to my mother and here was someone taking my mother. And my mother was friendly with him, but I couldn't. I didn't feel any of the warmth and happiness that my mother, I was glad to get off Ellis Island, but my father was a stranger.

SIGRIST: What was it like seeing, I assume that your mother

and father greeted each other in a warm way. How did you feel about that?

BELLOVIN: I said that my mother, here was my father taking my mother away from me. She had been the sole person in my life really. The sun rose and set, and now there was this man, this stranger, taking her part of the time. Part of the time is now given to him. And I was sort of on the sidelines.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how your step-brother greeted your father?

BELLOVIN: Also very distant. He had another axe to grind. My father had deserted him and his mother, and so he felt, there was no love lost there. So it was a difficult time for him, and . . .

SIGRIST: Yeah. A lot of mixed emotions going on.

BELLOVIN: Yes. Oh, definitely. Sparks were flying all over the place.

SIGRIST: When you left Ellis Island you started telling me about seeing the Statue of Liberty?

BELLOVIN: Yeah. We went on the ferry, and my father pointed out the statue, and I was overwhelmed, this statue. And to me this is a sight I'll never forget as long as I live. And every time I see it, I'm reminded of it. And my brother. (she laughs) I remember an incident on the ferry. My father was trying to make friends with my brother, and he had a Waterman's fountain pen. I remember it was silver, and he gave it to my brother. And when we got off the ferry, my brother had lost it. So this wasn't a very happy thing. It was a silver Waterman's fountain pen. I'll never forget that. My father was irate. What a beginning!

SIGRIST: When you got off the ferry and you were going, to The Bronx or to Brooklyn?

BELLOVIN: We were going to Brooklyn, on West Fifth Street and Kings Highway.

SIGRIST: Really? I just interviewed a woman on West Fifth Street.

BELLOVIN: You're kidding.

SIGRIST: Isn't that interesting. What was it like in a city, in a big city?

BELLOVIN: Well, first of all, the luxury of having an apartment with more than one room was, you know, something that I could not fathom. I mean, to me, it was, we were very wealthy. At that time we were. I mean, this was a lovely apartment. It was in a two-family house.

SIGRIST: Can you describe it for me, the lay out?

BELLOVIN: Oh, the lay out, as I said, there were two bedrooms and it was a kitchen and the dining room. And it was, as I said, as far as I can remember the rooms were large, one bathroom. The rooms were large, and to have a bed for myself, my brother and I slept in the same room, but it was unbelievably luxurious. I mean, having a bathtub. You know, a room to bathe in. I mean, that in itself was very exciting. And I couldn't believe that this is what I had come to. I was really very impressed.

SIGRIST: Was this an apartment that your father had procured for you specifically?

BELLOVIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: So his brother's not living there at all?

BELLOVIN: No, no, no.

SIGRIST: Did you ride on a subway or anything?

BELLOVIN: Um, yes. We rode on the subway, because my father did not have a car. We rode on a subway. And I don't remember how the baggage got to us, but I think it must have been delivered at a later date, because we didn't have it on the ferry, and it must have been delivered at a later date. But we came there, and it was fully furnished, and, as I said, I couldn't believe the luxury of it. To me, it wasn't too long thereafter when we had to give that luxury up, because my father lost his job and things were very bad.

SIGRIST: How did he lose his job?

BELLOVIN: The Depression.

SIGRIST: Oh, yeah. That's right. This is '29, sure.

BELLOVIN: Yeah, The Depression, within a few months.

SIGRIST: So not only is your family battling getting adapted to America, but they're in a terrible financial crisis too.

BELLOVIN: Yeah, several months later.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about this. Tell me, let's start by talking about adapting to America. How did you learn English?

BELLOVIN: Well, basically I learned English in the streets. I mean, I couldn't start school because certain things, like I said, my father said, "Wait, tonsils come out here." And so shortly after we got here that was one of the first things that happened, my tonsils came out.

SIGRIST: Was that a scary experience?

BELLOVIN: Yeah, because I had to stay overnight, and that was frightening. But basically children bounce back, and so within a couple of months I would go out of the house. I remember my father bought me a doll carriage

and a doll. It was green, one of these wicker things. I remember that. And I wish I had it now. It would be an heirloom. But, and children are very friendly. So one little girl came over to me to talk to me, and before you knew it I was speaking English. By the time I was seven and on my way to recovery in every area, I started school.

SIGRIST: So there's almost two years.

BELLOVIN: About a year-and-a-half. Yes, September. Practically two years. No, that, no. I started school in the middle, because at that time there wasn't registration. There was a semi-annual promotion. So I do remember I started school when I was, I came in October 1929 and I started school in, when I was seven, in '31. Yes, almost two years.

SIGRIST: Were there other immigrant children in school?

BELLOVIN: Not really, because we weren't living in an area where there were. As a matter of fact, it was a very interesting situation. I don't consider myself brilliant, but I had a pretty good mind. And in first

grade they gave you an I.Q. and I came out, not a moron, but just a little above. And so by the time I got to sixth grade I was doing rather well in school. And in that time they had the rapid advance classes from the sixth grade. And the teacher looked up my record and the last I.Q. I took I was about a hundred. And she didn't think I was rapid advance material yet. Her own evaluation of me seemed to indicate yes, I was. She tried, she got my mother up to talk to her and to find out what happened. Of course, my mother didn't speak English. This teacher happened to be Jewish, so she was able to understand my mother. And I wanted to go, because all my friends were going, so this was very important to me. So my mother said, "Look, if she wants to go," she knew nothing about the educational system, "let her go." She said, "But, you know, her I.Q. is low." And she says, "Well, she seems to be doing okay." And so I went, never, I mean, I did well. I kept up my end of the bargain, but it was interesting, the thing that happened that long ago, because I hadn't quite learned the language, reflected on my testing ability at that time, because

I was tested so early. But I did well.

SIGRIST: How about your mother? Did she, how did she adapt to America?

BELLOVIN: She didn't very well. I mean, we lived in Jewish areas, in ghettos, basically. And she never learned to speak English too well.

SIGRIST: Your father must have learned some English.

BELLOVIN: Oh, yeah. He, oh, he knew how to speak English, but he never really was able to go to school. I remember very distinctly, when I was in high school, my father said, "Look, you're going to teach me how to read and write." Because he could speak. And I did. We used to sit down every evening for about an hour or so, and I would teach him how to read and write.

SIGRIST: Did he learn quickly?

BELLOVIN: Yes, he had a very good mind. My mother did too, I mean, but she never wanted to. In her case, she never wanted to.

SIGRIST: Did she feel very alienated here in America?

BELLOVIN: No, because she found her own niche, so to speak. There were enough people that she could speak to and be friendly with. She understood English, but would never really speak it to any degree.

SIGRIST: Did you stay at this address for a long time?

BELLOVIN: No, no. Before the year was out, we had moved. And my brother was born a year later. My brother was born in 1930. We were already in Brownsville at this time, and in an apartment house. And not very nice quarters compared to what we had, but we had no choice.

SIGRIST: The financial crunches hit.

BELLOVIN: It was really bad.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about being an immigrant family, reunited actually, with a new mouth to feed. Is the step-brother living with you still?

BELLOVIN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: How did you make ends meet?

BELLOVIN: It was rough. We were on public assistance for a while, and it was, I mean, believe it or not, I can never talk about that. To me it was a very degrading thing. I could never talk about it until now.

SIGRIST: You were in the same situation as thousands and thousands of families.

BELLOVIN: I know that, but to me it was so degrading. It was so humiliating. It was a very difficult time. Because I was old enough to understand that we were getting public assistance and this was very foreign to me. And I didn't want to talk about it, think about it, or even acknowledge it.

SIGRIST: Was your step-brother old enough to get some work somewhere?

BELLOVIN: No, no. He was, as I said, five years older than I, and by this time he was about eleven, I think. Yeah, he was about eleven, twelve.

SIGRIST: Three young kids, basically.

BELLOVIN: Yeah. And my brother, my younger brother who was born here was a very sickly child to begin with. And doctors didn't want to come if you couldn't pay them, and it was clinics, you know, that. And it was very bad.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever get work?

BELLOVIN: No. She, in those days, working for the female was foreign. And I don't know, maybe my father wouldn't permit it. Or in the Depression, who would hire her when nobody had work? So it was just a Catch 22 situation.

SIGRIST: Describe the apartment in Brownsville.

BELLOVIN: It was one of these railroad-type things. It was a, I don't know how many families, because at that time, as a matter of fact, my grandfather brought over his family, and they were living in the same building with us. And so, of course, he was in the same financial crunch, and my father had an additional problem. Being that he was a very active union person, he was the first to be let go. And so it was an additional

burden to bear.

SIGRIST: So would he get other jobs and then be let go from them? Is that the implication?

BELLOVIN: He wouldn't be hired to begin with.

SIGRIST: He wouldn't be hired at all.

BELLOVIN: Because his reputation preceded him. So things were really bad.

SIGRIST: What was the neighborhood like in Brownsville?

BELLOVIN: Very crowded.

SIGRIST: Was it a Jewish neighborhood?

BELLOVIN: Yeah. Very crowded, very Jewish, very poor.

SIGRIST: This may sound like a glib question, and I don't mean it to be that way, but what did you do for entertainment in those days?

BELLOVIN: Oh, in those days you took pieces of building that became chalk, you know. The cracks, the bricks that became chalk, and played hopscotch, you know, with a

piece of glass that you found in a lot, or someone broke a window, or a rock, a piece of glass. You jumped rope a lot from the line that, you know, we didn't have driers. So there was a piece of rope from the line that you strung out to try the clothes, a piece left over, we jumped rope. We played with any kind of doll that we had from years ago. So those are the things that you did.

SIGRIST: Did you ever save up for a movie?

BELLOVIN: Not in those days. Not in those days. Later on, it was a nickel, we managed to scrape together.

SIGRIST: What kind of stuff did you eat during those days?

BELLOVIN: Whatever we could find, and whatever they gave us.

SIGRIST: Starches, probably.

BELLOVIN: Lots of that. Lots of that. I know my mother and father would deprive themselves to feed us because the children were primary.

SIGRIST: Three young kids. Well, just kind of zip us through

the Depression quickly.

BELLOVIN: Okay. From there we moved to a place called, uh, which was also in Brownsville. We had at that time my brother, myself and my step-brother. And we moved into a four room apartment, and we took in a boarder, a cousin of my mother's. And she lived with us for quite some time until my sister was born.

SIGRIST: Another child.

BELLOVIN: Another child, yeah. My sister was the tumor that the doctor said my mother had, and that ended up being my sister. They were going to operate, and someone checked it out and, surprise, my sister was born. And when the boarder found out that a baby was coming into the family she moved out, and therefore we couldn't afford to keep the four rooms, so we moved into a three-room apartment with three children.

SIGRIST: A lot of moving around.

BELLOVIN: Yeah. Well, in those days you moved when you could. When you needed a paint job, so you moved so you could get the concession and have the apartment painted at

the same time. So a lot of moving around. So we moved into a three-room apartment. And it was rough. My step-brother slept in the kitchen on a cot. My sister and I slept in one bed, a single bed, and my brother, my younger brother, slept in the other bed in the other room. So it was pretty crowded.

SIGRIST: I see. You mentioned earlier on that your mother died quite young.

BELLOVIN: Yes, she was fifty-eight when she died.

SIGRIST: Was that in this period some time?

BELLOVIN: No, no, no.

SIGRIST: A little bit later.

BELLOVIN: It's after I married.

SIGRIST: You're still quite young at this point. I see. In our couple remaining minutes I want to ask you a question: Did your parents, your father specifically, did he feel that his life was a lot better here in America?

BELLOVIN: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Even with the adversity?

BELLOVIN: Yeah. Even with the adversity. Because he felt that there was always the possibility of improving yourself. There he couldn't improve himself because he felt as if something was waiting to stamp him out. And, of course, with the advent of the political situation in Europe, he felt that, "Hey, I got out just in time." And furthermore, in later years, my father often talked about, "Gee whiz, look at this." My sister became a teacher, my younger sister. My brother became a lawyer. I became a teacher. I married a, my husband is an accountant. He says, "Could I have had any of this?" He was so proud of the fact that, "Look at my children. Look at what they were able to achieve for themselves." I was a little late, because when I came home, when I graduated from high school, and I said, "Look, I made an application for City College and I was accepted. Hurray for me!" My father said, "I'm sorry." Because we were just coming out of the Depression then. He

says, "I need your money to live on." "Pop, it's a free school." He said, "But you'll need money for books, for carfare." And the eight dollars a week I was making at the time I was working after school, he said, "That will help support the family."

SIGRIST: What a great disappointment.

BELLOVIN: Uh-huh. Very. So I started going to college at night. And I just told my grandchildren the other day, I says, "You know, your grandma took twenty-five years to graduate college. She wasn't very bright." So they said, "What do you mean?" And I said, "Well, I dropped out, my mother was sick. I'd go back. Regulations changed." So it was . . .

SIGRIST: But you got it.

BELLOVIN: I got it, finally. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: It took a long time to get it.

BELLOVIN: Yes. I said, "I wasn't very bright. Twenty-five years later I got it."

SIGRIST: It was well worth getting, or else you wouldn't have done it in the first place.

BELLOVIN: Yes, yes. Well, I was very determined.

SIGRIST: But I'm glad to hear that your father was very proud of the kids, and was very happy even, as you say, even in the face of the adversity. The sort of peaks and valleys that your life went on from the time that you were . . .

BELLOVIN: But one other thing. My father, who had been, as I said, an atheist, after my mother died he suddenly went back to the fold. What can I tell you? What can I tell you? Surprises all the time.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. Did your father live to be very old?

BELLOVIN: He was seventy-seven when he died.

SIGRIST: Well, I think that probably brings us right up to the present, more or less.

BELLOVIN: Yeah, practically.

SIGRIST: Sylvia, I want to thank you very much for coming out to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: I hope I haven't bored you.

SIGRIST: No, God, no, not at all.

BELLOVIN: As I said, my memories, and fact and fiction, tend to blend a little in my mind.

SIGRIST: No, I think it was a splendid interview.

BELLOVIN: Thank you.

SIGRIST: I want to thank you very much. And this is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.