

EI-050

LAWRENCE MEINWALD

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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POLAND, 1920

AGE 6

SIGRIST: . . . end of thirty minutes. See, we're making you a cassette as we do it, so you'll have a copy to go home with.

MEINWALD: Oh, great. Wonderful.

SIGRIST: At the end of thirty minutes, Ken is going to give me a sign and I'll stop you wherever we are because we've got to flip the cassette over.

MEINWALD: Okay, fine.

SIGRIST: What else do you I need to warn you about? I think that's it. Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, May 29th. We're here at Ellis Island with Lawrence Meinwald, who came from Poland in 1920 when he was age six. Good morning.

MEINWALD: Good morning. 1991.

SIGRIST: 1991. That's right. That's today, this year.
Mr. Meinwald, could you please give your full name, including a middle name, if there is one, and your date of birth.

MEINWALD: Okay. My name is Elieza Benpincus Meinwald. M-A-J-N-W-A-L-D. Americanized it's Lawrence, the son of Pincus, Meinwald, M-E-I-N-W-A-L-D. My mother's name was Sarah, the daughter of Moses Krymka, and she married my father, became Majnwald, and Americanized, M-E-I-N-W-A-L-D.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Krim, Krim . . .

MEINWALD: K-R-Y-M-K-A, but in America they call it Kramer. She had two children. I was the oldest, born June 18, 1914, and my daughter, I'm sorry, my sister Dorothy, who was only four or five weeks old when we left Warsaw, Poland to come to America. In the fall, or late summer, of 1920 on the Red Star Line, and the name of the ship was Zeeland, S.S. Zeeland. And the best I can spell it is Z-E-E-L-A-N-D. And the story goes that had . . .

SIGRIST: What town were you born in, sir?

MEINWALD: I was born in Warsaw, the capital of Poland at 24,

uh. (he pauses) It just escapes me. I'll think of it later.
Uh, in Warsaw, Poland. And I remember my home very well.

SIGRIST: Would you describe it for us, please?

MEINWALD: Yes. The, it was on the main street in the Jewish ghetto. It had two tremendous doors, and they were only opened, as I remember, for either weddings or funerals because they led into a tremendous courtyard. But for everyday use, the right-hand door had a small door. So you opened the small door and you entered. And the concierge, who had about ten steps leading up to her window, she had a curtain on the window, and she would see everyone that came in. If she didn't know who you were she'd open the door and come out and ask you what you're doing or who are you looking for and what you want.

SIGRIST: What were the doors made out of?

MEINWALD: As best as I can remember they were very heavy iron doors. Whether they were bronze or steel, I wouldn't know. And they led into a round, circular courtyard. And from that courtyard you had entrances to each house, so the houses were numbered. And we lived on the third floor in an apartment. We had, I remember, an indoor bathroom, but there was no ventilation. And if you had to go in and do your business, my mother would give me a small piece of paper. It looked like a

lavender paper. She would light it and then put it out, and you went in there and you'd sit on the potty and you would smell beautiful fragrances, and that was in lieu of interior ventilation. I also remember we had two tremendous armoires. One was a light, pine-colored armoire, and one was a dark, rich, mahogany-colored armoire. We were middle-class people. My father had a bakery in a little town outside of Warsaw, maybe six, seven miles, in a town called Yablona, Y-A-B-L-O-N-A. It's famous for the black church, and there was a small town, and my father was the local baker. He was the only baker. I remember vividly that when me, when the Germans first penetrated the Poland and were in control of the country . . .

SIGRIST: In World War I.

MEINWALD: In World War I, my father had to bake bread for ration card, and he would get that ration card, and he'd give him X number of loaves, whatever the ration card read. And on one occasion, when my father went to visit his parents in the dead of night, they were knocking on the glass doors and windows screaming and pleading for chelba, [the conventional spelling is most likely "chleb"] which meant "bread" in Poland.

SIGRIST: Could you spell that, please?

MEINWALD: C-H-E-L-B-A, chelba. And we were all alone, my

mother and I and my sister. Nope, she wasn't born yet. It was just my mother and I. And out of fear she left the rear of the store because they were beginning to break the windows to come into the bakery. And we ran down the street to get shelter in a pharmacy. The name is Aptoke. [conventional spelling is "apteka"] Aptoke, A-P-T-O-K-E. That's Polish for drugstore. I remember how the druggist stuck his head out with the cap and the little ball hanging down, and he said, "(he speaks in Polish)" "What do you want?" And my mother said, "They're breaking down the glass doors in the bakery looking for bread." And he took us in, and he gave us shelter for the night.

SIGRIST: May we talk a little bit about your father, since we're . . .

MEINWALD: My father was a baker. He was the son of a baker. His grandfather was a baker. He was born in a little town called Yablon, Novograd. N-O-V-O-G-R-A-D. And they were the local bakers in that village. It was a rural village. It was very close to his family. I think there were seven brothers and two sisters. And they all worked in the bakery and worked very hard. I remember my father was . . . (he is moved and must pause)

SIGRIST: It's all right.

MEINWALD: Very dedicated to him. He would walk twenty miles to visit him for a couple of hours, and then come back and work in the bakery.

SIGRIST: You're talking about his father?

MEINWALD: My father would go to visit his father and would walk twenty miles. (he clears his throat) A very close-knit family.

SIGRIST: What did he look like?

MEINWALD: He was a rugged, strong man, a man of about five-foot-eleven. And he was quite learned. He spoke and read Yiddish, Polish, Russian, Hebrew fluently. And he taught us values of respect and love of family.

SIGRIST: Did you ever help him at the bakery?

MEINWALD: It's interesting you should say that. When we were in America and he would take ill, my mother would say, "Go help him." And in the local bakeries in Brooklyn where we lived it was a one-man job and we would have just a porter who would sweep the floors and help carry some of the heavy things. And I helped him do whatever was necessary. He had a big oven, and he had to feed the oven with coal. He had to knead the bread and make rolls and make challahs and make pumpernickel. And he was

very proud of what he did, and he did it well. And he would have machinery that had safety factors on it. And in order to save time, because he was there alone, he would put a, for example, while the bread was in the big machine with big knives kneading it and trying to break it down, he would turn the little wheel so he can go and scrape off the remnants of the dough so it would get into the main bread. He, the automatic safety valve would cut off the knives, but he didn't want to lose that time. So he would put a piece of wood to bypass the safety valve. And of course I went home and told my mother about that, and that was the end of me working in the bakery because he didn't want me around. He was a very hard worker, very loyal. The man worked twelve hours when we arrived in America, a day, only six days. He would never work on the Jewish Sabbath.

SIGRIST: In Poland, were your grandparents an important part of your life?

MEINWALD: Uh, the grandparents on my father's side, I remember them vaguely because we lived in Warsaw and the bakery was in Yablona some five or seven miles outside of Warsaw, and Novograd was maybe twenty miles away, so we didn't see him that often. And being a baker, he was always so busy in the bakery that it was, there was very little opportunity to meet with my

grandparents from my father's side. The same thing from my mother's side. My mother's side, my grandfather was a hat maker, a very religious man. And they were in the, my mother was born in a town called Prushnitz, P-R-U-S-H-N-I-T-Z. And that was quite a distance, too. So we didn't have a great opportunity to socialize.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about your mother a little bit. You said her name was Sarah.

SIGRIST: My mother's name was Sarah. Her father's name was Morris, or Moses. And she was a bit of a rebel. She did a lot of reading, and she wanted to escape from the small village which had mud streets and simple houses and few rooms and very little opportunity to meet young men. So she went to work as a saleslady for a distant cousin in Warsaw. And, as is the usual case, when the young woman comes from the country to work for the urban relatives, they take advantage of her. She worked long hours for very little pay, but she had the privilege of having a home, a roof over her head, and something to eat, but she had very little money. I don't know how she met my father, but they met and they were married in 1912. And I was born in 1914 in what the documents say June 18th, 1914.

SIGRIST: Were you born at home or in a hospital?

MEINWALD: I was born in a hospital in Warsaw, and I remember when my sister was born just prior to our coming to America. She was born in the hospital, too. And I also remember that we were middle-class people. In the urban community, Warsaw was considered the Paris of the east. And as a youngster I remember outside of my home there were street cars and there were paved streets, and there were puppet shows. And there was a jewelry store on the left of the door as you went out, and there was a shop selling food on the right as you went out. I also remember some rowdies would grab a Jew by his beard and make him kiss the ground in an act of showing that they're superior to him. I felt anti-Semitism was rearing its head in the city, but it was really prevalent in the small towns like Prushnitz and Novograd and Vishigrad, where you had to watch your P's and Q's and walk off the mud street if someone was going in the opposite direction.

SIGRIST: I see. Did your mother work after she was married?

MEINWALD: After she was married she didn't work, and my father, at one point in his life, shortly after their marriage, well, six years after. Six years, they're married in 1912, and six years, eight years. Eight years after they were married and she had not been working and he was working. He came home one day and said, "We're coming to America." And I remember my mother

crying. She didn't want to go. She wanted to stay. He said, "That's final, and that's it." And a few days later my mother gave birth to my sister. We waited five or six weeks, and we left the country.

SIGRIST: Before we get you out of Warsaw, let me just ask you a kind of general question. What was it like being a little kid growing up in Warsaw?

MEINWALD: Well . . .

SIGRIST: And what did you do all day?

MEINWALD: Like all other kids we had to play in the streets. (he laughs) You'd get a bloody nose. I remember I gave another kid a bloody nose and ran up the four stories where I lived and hid under the bed, and they came looking for me.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of kids in this neighborhood?

MEINWALD: There were lots of kids there, yes, and some were friendlier than others. And I always, even though we spoke Polish in the house, and I spoke only Polish. I didn't know any Yiddish or spoke any other foreign language. I was made to realize that I was different because of my religion and being a Jew.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about your religious life. Was there a synagogue in the neighborhood?

MEINWALD: There was a synagogue in the neighborhood because we lived in the ghetto. There were many synagogues there. And I do remember that we observed all the holidays, and I was made cognizant of my religious background. And I knew what the Sabbath meant because my mother lit candles in the house, and my father never worked on a Friday night or the Sabbath. And he said the prayers, and it's continued on (he pauses, moved with emotion) to my home. And we do the same thing. (he clears his throat) It's a little difficult for my children to understand. I've given them all Jewish backgrounds, but it's a little more difficult for them to understand the importance.

SIGRIST: Were both your parents very religious people?

MEINWALD: We weren't religious in the sense that we, my father was clean-shaven. He didn't have the long side-curls and didn't observe, although he believed in the Hasidim, to the extent of singing, the Hasidim, the main purpose of the Hasidim movement is to pray with song and dance fervently. That is really the thrust of the Hasidic movement. And my father considered himself a Hasid, but did not partake with the long beard and the sideburns and he wasn't fanatically observant in that respect.

But he used to say, "I'm really a Hasid." Because he would sing and pray with fervor.

SIGRIST: Can you describe a Passover celebration when you were a kid in Poland?

MEINWALD: Yes. When we were in Poland, Passover was a trying time for us because most of the family were far away, so it was very intimate. And you didn't have a seder of ten, fifteen people. But there were occasions, rarely. I remember that we went to my mother's parents, and it was something special. It was a big gathering, because most of her sisters and brothers were younger than her and they were still at home, and so it was colorful. But the city folk, (he laughs) like we were city folk, we no longer had the opportunity to practice the religion as they did in the little villages called shetels. S-H-E-T-E-L-S. Shetels meant the village with the mud streets and the market fairs once a week and wagons and horses. Whereas in the, in Warsaw, I saw, we saw wagons and horses, but it wasn't, on cobblestones, and we saw trolley cars, and it was entirely different. We were the urbanized city folk.

SIGRIST: The city slickers.

MEINWALD: The city slickers.

SIGRIST: Why did your father want to come to America?

MEINWALD: My father decided that he had no future in that country. He had gone into this bakery with a brother-in-law, and he wasn't very happy with the brother-in-law. The brother-in-law wasn't carrying his load, and he decided he'll give, he'll give his interest in the bakery to his brother-in-law and take off for America. Of course, we had wonderful dreams.

SIGRIST: You said your mother didn't want to come.

MEINWALD: My mother cried for hours, and he reassured her that things will be better. And finally he convinced her, and we made plans to go.

SIGRIST: As a little kid, what did you know of America?

MEINWALD: I knew nothing, absolutely nothing. But my mother had a young brother who wanted to go. He was sixteen. And he had, he didn't have any papers, he didn't have any right to go. And he appealed to my mother and father. And finally, out of desperation, he did something that was terrible, I guess in the eyes of the law, because it was illegal to do it. We travelled in these big straw trunks that you have displayed here at Ellis Island. And they're tremendous. And my mother and father took this young brother of my mother and put him in and packed him

with clothing to get him across the border into Danzig. That was our first stop when we left Warsaw. Our first stop was Danzig. It's now called Gdansk. That's where Lech Walensa made his claim to fame as an electrician. And that was a big, Jewish town, a big Jewish city. And that was a free port at the time.

This was after the war. It was a free port. And so we smuggled him into Danzig, and that, we couldn't do any more for him but leave him.

SIGRIST: How did you get from Warsaw to Danzig?

MEINWALD: We came by train.

SIGRIST: Was this the first time you'd ever been on a train?

MEINWALD: This was the first time I've ever been on a train, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything about that?

MEINWALD: I remember that the Polish soldiers who were riding in the train were hassling my mother. They wanted the baby in her arms. My sister was five, six weeks, maybe seven weeks, and she was cradling my sister in her arms, and they wanted to take the child and throw her out the window. So she pleaded and begged and cried, and finally she took off her marriage ring, her gold marriage ring, and gave it to them, and they took it

and left her alone. That was our train ride from Poland into Danzig. And from Danzig we went by train to Antwerp in Belgium.

I remember that was an uneventful trip. I remember arriving in Belgium and seeing the milk carts with the dogs pulling the milk carts. And we stayed in Antwerp for some unknown reason about a week or two, and then we boarded the ship to come to America.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you took with you?

MEINWALD: We, my father took a memento, a pipe. It was a long pipe about four feet long made of ceramic. It came in parts and the end of it you put in the tobacco. And it was colorfully etched with animals and pictures and had tassels on it. And he took some personal, other mementoes of his days in the war when he served in the Russian army. And other than that we only took clothing. I do remember an urn, an urn and a Friday night candelabra, and pillows. Pillows was a sign of wealth because they were down pillows, and that was a treasure. So I remember the down pillows, I remember the candelabra. I remember my father's pipe that I'm sad to say he gave to my aunt, who always promised to give it to me, which I never got. But he was a very good-natured man.

SIGRIST: So you were in Antwerp, you said, how long?

MEINWALD: We were in Antwerp approximately a week or perhaps

ten days. Maybe two weeks.

SIGRIST: Where did you stay?

MEINWALD: I really don't know where we stayed, but it must have been some kind of a shelter or a hostel or maybe a Jewish community did something to help us. I have no, I just remember the dogs and the milk cans and always, was always in my mind.

SIGRIST: When you were in Antwerp were you processed at all? Did you have to undergo any examinations, or . . .

MEINWALD: If we did, I had no knowledge of it.

SIGRIST: Well, let's talk about getting on the boat.

MEINWALD: Okay. Well, we got on the boat. Of course, we went steerage. Steerage meant a horrible experience, but to me as a youngster I guess it was fun. We slept in double-decker beds, bunks. My mother had a double-decker bunk and my father had a double-decker bunk with myself on the top, and I guess my sister slept with her. And food was not good, the conditions were terrible. We travelled more than two weeks, and there were two very severe storms that I remember that they put us into lifeboats. They were going to abandon the ship. It wasn't a fire drill. It was a real, it was a threat. They felt they were going to abandon the ship, and we got into lifeboats to be

lowered. But for one reason or another it calmed down, and then we evacuated the lifeboats and we went back to our quarters.

SIGRIST: Did you have your own cabin, or were you in a big room with lots of other people?

MEINWALD: Uh, I don't recall whether it was an individual room or not. I don't recall, but I remember the double-decker beds. And the food was so bad that my father and I would sneak up to an upper class. They were barricaded. You weren't allowed to go. But we snuck up there and we found garbage cans on the deck in the corner. And the garbage of the first class passengers were placed there, and the sailors used to throw pieces out for the gulls. And we would steal from the garbage can pieces of meat, even though we were kosher, but we were so hungry that we took them, and whatever we could salvage from the garbage can, I tell my grandchildren, (he is moved) "I ate out of a garbage can." They can't understand it. But we survived. I remember that people in the second class would throw us pieces of sugar and everybody would scramble for it on the lower deck. And on one occasion, I don't know what the occasion was, but we all lined up and we were given bananas. We never saw a banana before now.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: You said you had a banana.

MEINWALD: Oh, I was describing the occasion when we lined up and they gave us free bananas. I had never seen a banana in my life. So when I was given the banana I bit into it skin and all until I was shown that you had to peel the banana. We were always in line. Everything was aligned, as they say in England. We always were queuing up, queuing up, queuing up for one thing or another. Conditions were horrible on the ship, but . . .

SIGRIST: Did you get sick?

MEINWALD: My mother and my sister were ill. My father and I were the only ones that didn't get ill, and we ran all over the boat scrounging for food all the time. We never got ill. No matter how severe, the weather was pretty rough on many occasions.

SIGRIST: Did they supply any kind of entertainment for you? Did they have organized games, or anything like that?

MEINWALD: Nothing that I recall at all. But certain denominations had instruments and they would sing or play something. But nothing was organized. There was no interest taken in the passengers. We were just piled in there, so much

ahead in steerage, just to get to America the golden land.

SIGRIST: Now, this younger brother of your mother's is not with you.

MEINWALD: We left the younger brother in . . .

SIGRIST: In Danzig?

MEINWALD: Danzig. And what happened, we gave him, my mother, parents gave him some money. And when he ran out of the money he didn't know what to do. So he walked the streets and he saw a gentleman wearing little American flag in his lapel. Of course, in those days it was fashionable. Everybody was proud to be Americans, the way I am. But he came over to him, and he said to him, "Do you speak Yiddish?" He said to him in Yiddish. "Do you speak Yiddish?" He said, "Yes." And he told him his tale of woe, that his sister left him there with his brother-in-law, he had no way of taking him, he had no papers, he had nothing, and they all went to America. Could he help him? And this man went into the American embassy and told him he's a long-lost cousin and filled out documents and paid passage for him to come to America with him. Of course this man's name was Montalak, M-O-N-T-A-L-A-K. He was a swell guy. He became a friend of the family. The family all raised money and returned him the price of the ticket. But he would come with his

mandolin to all family functions. I always remember his wife and himself and his two beautiful daughters, and they would sing, and he would play the, this instrument. That's how my uncle came to America.

SIGRIST: Hmm. That's a great story. Uh, all right. So you were on the boat two weeks, you said?

MEINWALD: We were on the boat approximately two weeks through terrible weather.

SIGRIST: So what's it like coming into New York Harbor, finally?

MEINWALD: Well, one morning there was a complete rumble which got louder and louder and louder. We couldn't identify it, what it was. It was very early in the morning, maybe six, maybe seven in the morning. I have no idea. But it was very, very early in the morning at daybreak. And we heard this tremendous rumble which got louder and louder and louder. So my father and I, we dressed immediately and we ran out to the deck and there (he is moved) were people of all denominations. Some on their knees making the sign of the cross, Jews in their prayer shawls, as we were passing the Statue of Liberty. It was the first time I saw it. It was a great sight. I didn't know what it meant. But we stayed on deck, and everybody was anxious, and everybody

was happy, and everybody was sad. It's a sight (he is moved) I will never forget. But that was our introduction to America.

And then we landed at Ellis Island and we came off, and we were queued up again, and going through some process. And my father, while he was on the ship, had shaved himself with a straight razor and evidently cut his face and he had a tiny scar. It was just drying up, perhaps. And as he was in this line, they put a white chalk on his lapel. We didn't know what the meaning of it was. He did see some people brush it off, wiping it off. But he didn't know what it was, and he didn't want to do the wrong thing, so he didn't do anything. And as the line progressed at one point, they pulled him out of the line without any explanation. And my mother started to plead and cry, and they pulled him aside. He didn't know. They were only talking English. There was no one there to translate. Until someone came by from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society who came over and spoke to us in Yiddish and in Polish and said, "It's all right. They're just taking him to have a health examination, and he'll be all right. They'll just hold him for a few days. So don't worry. You're safe here, no problem." So they put him in the hospital for about nine or ten days. He said he had a ball. He had the best food, they gave him. And he didn't care if it was kosher or non-kosher. He ate it, because he was starved. And everything was fine. My mother and I, we struggled here. The

nine or ten days were difficult in this respect. The food, as I remember, was not great. But what I remember most vividly (he laughs) was the task that I had. We were given, again, double beds, a double-bunker. My mother and my sister had the lower bunk, and I had the upper bunk. To this day, and no one seems to be able to give me any explanation for it, is why I had to drag both mattresses off that double bunk and bring it to a pile at the other end of this big, tremendous hall where they were set up and leave them there. And then at night I had to go back to the pile and drag those two mattresses back to the double bunk and put them up. Why didn't they let them just stay there?

So at seventy-seven, I've never solved that mystery. But we spent the nine, ten days. I remember my mother's sister's husband came to visit us, and he brought me a Hershey bar. First of all, when we had the visitors, we didn't know. They were calling out on the loudspeaker a name, and it made no sense to us, and we didn't recognize it, so my mother didn't know. But others there said, "I think they're calling your name. Go over and ask." And she did, and it was true. We had, my uncle and my aunt came to visit. So I tagged along. My mother had my sister in her arms and I held onto her dress, tagged along. And I saw this big six-foot-four, or he looked like seven-foot-five human being pick me up. And he threw me along the tile floor for maybe fifty feet. I don't know why. I wouldn't want to

meet him now. And finally they let me come with my mother to what I remember was a gate. I can't find it on the island. My last visit here I've been unable to find it. It was a big iron gate, and he gave me the Hershey bar through the gate. And I enjoyed that, and I have ever since. I told this story to a friend of mine, and he sent me, I meant to bring it today, he sent me a brass Hershey bar, which is a letter, it's a, it's on my desk as a letter plate.

SIGRIST: What was there to do all that time? What did you do?

MEINWALD: We just idled our time away. I don't remember doing anything but running around. We were here, after all, nine, ten days. It felt like nine years. We got no communication on what was going on with my father. But we just ate and had to drag the mattresses. That was about the most I could think of during our stay.

SIGRIST: Talk about eating here. Where did you eat?

MEINWALD: We ate in a big, big hall with long, long tables. And I just remember I was always hungry. I was always hungry. I was always looking for something to eat. But it's a status, and there was no organized recreation, no interest taken. The only thing is that the HIAS did have representatives try to give us some information as to where we stood, and the explanation

was that if they discover anything serious that we would all be sent back, but if it's not serious we'll be admitted to the United States of America.

SIGRIST: What was your mother thinking through all of this? And she didn't want to come to begin with.

MEINWALD: She, true. She didn't want to come to begin with, but once she was here and once she made this tremendous trip she was very anxious to enter the country. And she had seen her sister that she hadn't seen in twenty years, and it was a big lift for her, and they told her wonderful stories and we were very anxious to get in. And I don't know what the explanations he had to give. I understand now if he had answered some questions incorrectly, he would have been sent back on that. We were not, we were not told what to say. Nobody explained things to us. But, and of course my aunt and my uncle knew nothing of the intricacies of what would permit you to come in or not.

SIGRIST: Was it crowded here?

MEINWALD: Was it crowded? Was it crowded? Well, that's putting it mildly. It wasn't crowded. It was impossible. It was impossible. There were waves and waves of people coming in here every day, every minute. I got to know somebody, a day later they were gone. There were others there, and many

different languages, and I spoke only Polish. So I couldn't speak anything else. I didn't know any Yiddish, because Yiddish was never spoken in my house. I learned Yiddish, strangely enough, in America. Because after we came in 1920 my mother's mother, my mother's father had died, so my mother's mother was brought to America. And she lived with us for twenty-two years, and I learned Yiddish from her because that was the only language she could speak. Although she spoke Polish too, she didn't want to speak Polish, so she insisted on speaking Yiddish. And that's how I learned Yiddish. Now I speak it fluently.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, let's get you off of Ellis Island. You said your father had a great time in the hospital.

MEINWALD: He had a great time, and the food was great. And now we passed everything and we entered, we entered a car, and we were being driven to South Brooklyn where my aunt lived. It's around Garfield Place or First Street and Fifth Avenue. I remember the overhead trains were rumbling by all the time. And as we were driving, I kept looking out the window, and I said to my mother in Polish, "How do they get the clothing on those lines?" And my aunt was responding in Yiddish, and I said to my mother, "Please tell her I don't understand any Yiddish, she should talk Polish to me." But she had forgotten her Polish

because she had left a long, long time ago. So when we arrived at the apartment, she took me into the kitchen and she opened the window and she showed me the little wheel with the line, and she showed me how to move the line, how to put the clothespins on it and move it, and I thought that was the greatest thing I ever saw in my life. And, of course, I was impressed with the bathroom. I didn't have to go into the bathroom with a piece of paper lit. And the train was only a number of feet from my window, and the largeness of the rooms, and the food, which was to be a revelation.

SIGRIST: Of course, you had come from a city environment, too.

MEINWALD: Yes.

SIGRIST: So maybe New York and Brooklyn wasn't quite the surprise that it might have been had you come from one of the shetels outside of Warsaw.

MEINWALD: That's true, but I had never seen a train, an elevated train so high running in front of my windows. And there were automobiles, and there were horses and wagons, and there was activity. And yes, it was a city, and I was accustomed to a city. But the newness of all the different things, the excitement. Of course, everyone wanted to look at me and touch me to see if I'm real, and everyone babbled in

language that I didn't understand, which I learned later was English and Yiddish. I didn't understand either one of them. And everyone made a fuss over us, and it was exciting. My father stayed there, we only stayed there two weeks, because my father was a very proud man. He didn't want anybody. He said, "Just give me a job. Get me a job, and I'll earn my pay." He still had some Polish rubles. I don't know how much it was worth in the country, but they did get my father a job. He worked six days a week, twelve to fourteen hours a day in a cellar. If you saw that movie The New Moon with Dukakis' sister in it, you saw the bakery was in the basement. That's the way bakeries were in those days. The ovens were in the basement. And when it rained there would be two or three inches or four inches of water, and my father had to work in rubbers. And we moved out of my aunt's house and we came to Borough Park in Brooklyn, and someone found us a room, one room, behind the store. It was a chicken store. And my mother cried every day that month we were there. We were there only one month because she said if she had to live in the street she won't live there any more. No matter how she scrubbed that place, the lice from the chickens, you know, came into the room. And I remember she used to burn kerosene on the bed, on the springs, to kill the bedbugs and the lice. One month we stayed there, and then we got an apartment in Borough Park, and my father got himself a

steady job, and he worked all his life.

SIGRIST: You told us how you learned Yiddish. How did you learn English?

MEINWALD: Well, English came to me rather rapidly. Most people say, "You don't have an accent." (he laughs) That's true, I don't have an accent. I was six. My father registered me in the Yeshiva, which is a parochial school in Borough Park at 50th Street and 13th Avenue.

SIGRIST: How soon after you got here?

MEINWALD: Uh, as soon as he had a few bucks that he could pay for me. And we learned Hebrew in the morning from eight to twelve, then we had a lunch break, and then from one to six we learned English, and we had English. And I wasn't very anxious to attend that school because I wanted to be more Americanized, and I didn't have scholastic ambitions at that time, and never wanted to go to school. But I did, and I went to a regular public school a year later.

SIGRIST: And this is where you basically picked up your English?

MEINWALD: Yes.

SIGRIST: What about Ma and Dad? How did they learn English, or did they learn English?

MEINWALD: Yes. My father immediately wanted to be a citizen, and they said, "You have to be able to write your name, and you have to answer some questions." So he hired a tutor. I remember it very well. The tutor would come at seven in the morning. My father would go to work at six in the evening and he'd work all night and he'd be back home at seven and the tutor was there at seven and he would tell him, "Philip, write an E. No, no, no. Not, write a Russian I. That," he says, "is an E in English." And he kept, my father was falling asleep. He had just put in fourteen hours of hard work, but he was anxious, and he learned how to sign his name, and he could write a little bit in English, and he spoke English with a heavy accent, but he spoke it, and he was very proud of himself. (he is moved) He said, "I'm an American. I'm not a Polish, I'm an American." And my mother learned English, too. She didn't do as well as he did, but she learned English. Spoke with an accent.

SIGRIST: Did she take a class, or . . .

MEINWALD: No, always busy working, with two children. I was always embarrassed if a teacher said to me, "You've got to bring your mother." I would scrub floors if he would leave me alone

because I was ashamed to bring her because she didn't speak without an accent. As a matter of fact, all applications. I remember as a youngster that I, they say "Place of Birth" I'd put U.S.A. I never identified, until I got older. When I got to be, you know, ten, twelve years old and had to start filling out documents, I realized the seriousness of putting your Place of Birth. And so I would put "Warsaw, Poland." And the United States of America, through their wisdom, I don't know why, has to this very day not released my identity as a Polish citizen by putting in my passport. They put U.S.A, then they put in parenthesis Poland. So for many, many years, I had wanted to see where I was born much earlier than when I went. But according to Polish law had I gone to Poland, and being of draft age, I was, they were permitted to put me into the Polish army.

I could just see the headline, "Larry Meinwald in the Polish Army." So I never went. And the United States government said, "We can't protect you." I understand Greece had the same thing, but in Greece you were able to give X dollars and they'd let you alone. But Poland insisted on your serving in the army. And until a treaty was signed between the United States and Poland I never went to Poland. And when they signed that treaty I went to see where I was born in Warsaw, and there was only a big empty field (he is moved) with a monument in the middle. So I couldn't recognize the buildings. But there was a square nearby

that was reconstructed the way it was. I did recognize the square, but that was not, it was a little distance from my home.

(he blows his nose) Excuse me.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever work in America?

MEINWALD: No. My mother never worked in America. My father worked all his life, until one day he says he wants to retire. I said, "Fine. I'll send you to Poland." He would absolutely not go. He said, "This is my country."

SIGRIST: Describe, once you settled in Borough Park, can you describe the neighborhood?

MEINWALD: Yes.

SIGRIST: Was it a Jewish neighborhood?

MEINWALD: Borough Park was a very, very Jewish neighborhood. Everybody there, Friday night the community closed down. I knew, I was in one of the shetels back in Poland, and most of the people were Jewish. There were a sprinkling here and there of other ethnic backgrounds, but I would say ninety-nine percent of the community, the stores, the shopkeepers, all the facilities, the drugstores, everything was Jewish. We lived, our first apartment after the chicken store was on 38th Street and 13th Avenue, and then we moved to 41st Street and 13th

Avenue. Then we moved to 42nd Street between 13th and 14th, then we moved to 44th Street.

SIGRIST: You moved around a lot.

MEINWALD: Now, the reason why we had been moving, well, I must tell you that every time you got a one month's free rent we moved. See? Until it came a day, a time that we moved to Bensonhurst, and there we stayed for over thirty-five years. As a matter of fact, my parents both died from there. They lived in Bensonhurst. And so, and then I got married.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, in our final few minutes, why don't you tell us a little bit about, um, you were mentioning earlier about some of your contributions to the country. Let's talk about that.

MEINWALD: Oh, yeah. Coming over on the ferry I was trying to think out what I would have lost if the United States of America saw in their wisdom not to let us come in. I'm sure we would have all perished or have been bars of soap. And on the other side what would the United States of America have lost if there wasn't a guy like Lawrence Meinwald to have come to America. What did he do here? What did he accomplish here? In the few moments that I had on the ferry I was thinking I've been in business almost fifty-five years. I have owned approximately

two hundred pieces of real estate from vacant land, commercial buildings, residential buildings, small hotels. I would say I have employed in my lifetime thousands of people, five thousand, maybe ten thousand. I tried to put a statistic together as to what I contributed in dollars and sense. Considering income taxes, real estate taxes, water taxes and sales taxes and all the other taxes that go along with it, I would say fifty million bucks, if you want to reduce it to dollars and cents, I spent and contributed. My gross income had been in such a way that I was able to afford to pay all these. I think I have contributed. I raised two daughters here. One married, and she has three boys. Two graduated University of Maryland. One I just went to the graduation a few weeks ago. The third one is in his second, third year at the University of Maryland. My other daughter, she's thirty-eight, unmarried. She got a Bachelor in Music, a Master's in Music. She couldn't make a living at it. She said, "Look, Dad, if you help me, put me through school, I'll take another profession." And now she's an attorney. So I think I raised a family, I planted trees, lots of trees. I love trees. I planted trees in West Hampton Beach, Long Island. I planted trees in Kings Point Long Island and part of Great Neck. And now I am planting trees in Goshen, New York where I have a small farm and I breed horses and I enjoy, I keep buying trees, and the wholesalers keep saying, "Hey, Larry,

you've got more trees than you can take care of," I said, "and I need them big, because I don't have much time to wait till they grow up." At seventy-seven, if God's good to me, every day.

SIGRIST: So you're glad they let you in then.

MEINWALD: I'm glad they let me in. I'm proud. Wherever I go in Europe, and I've travelled extensively all over Europe and in Africa and in South America. I tell them I was born in Poland, I came to America. (he is moved) America was very good to me, very good. I'm proud of America. I would give my life for America. Nothing hurts me more when they burn the flag. They have no right to do it. They should have come where I came from, where I saw them take a Jew by the beard and pull him down to the ground and say, "Kiss the ground, and pick up the cigarettes off the ground." They don't know what America is. Yes, everybody has a freedom of speech and may voice their opinions, and I'll respect anybody with his opinion. They don't have to agree with me, and I don't have to agree with them. But where the hell do you get freedom like you get in America?

SIGRIST: Indeed, indeed. Mr. Meinwald, I want to thank you for coming out to Ellis Island today and taking your time . . .

MEINWALD: I want to thank you. I appreciate very much for this wonderful opportunity to have come out here and tell what I

remember of coming to America and this beautiful, wonderful
land. (he is moved)

SIGRIST: Thank you.

MEINWALD: Thank you.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National
Park Service.