

EI-053

JOSEPH PARNES

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INTERVIEWER: BRIAN FEENEY

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FEENEY: Good afternoon. This is Brian Feeney, and I'm at Ellis Island. This is July 15, 1991. I'm here in the recording studio today with Mr. Joseph Parnes. Good afternoon, Mr. Parnes.

PARNES: Good afternoon.

FEENEY: Thank you for joining us today. Mr. Parnes, what year were you born?

PARNES: July 4th, 1907.

FEENEY: And in what country?

PARNES: Poland.

FEENEY: And do you remember growing up in Poland?

PARNES: Yeah.

FEENEY: What town were you from?

PARNES: Pszemyszlany.

FEENEY: What part of Poland is that?

PARNES: It's the eastern part. It's a small town not far from Lemberg. In Polish it's L'vov. L'vov is supposed to be a big town. It's about six miles from L'vov.

FEENEY: But your town itself was a small town? Your town was a small town?

PARNES: Yeah, a very small town. Yeah, a small town.

FEENEY: Was it mainly agriculture in that area there? Any farming?

PARNES: It's, yes, farmers. And mostly, no industry whatsoever. You know, it's poor people usually, a small town. And we lived in a, you know, in a small house, you know, in one of them wooden houses. And, a one-room house, rather. And . . .

FEENEY: Were there many other houses around you there?

PARNES: Yeah, you know. It's like we noticed on the film that I saw downstairs. It's exactly what it showed. It did show you Poland, you know, the small houses. And naturally I went to, they call it, to the Hebrew school. There was no, you know, a Jewish boy has to go, has to learn something, so you have, they called the cheider. So I went to Hebrew school and you learned, you know. But my mother wanted to learn, you know, the alphabets also from the, you know, like the English, the ABC's, DEF, because in the Hebrew school you only learned the Hebrew and the Bible. That's all you learned, nothing else. And so I went to the Polish school.

FEENEY: How old were you when you started in the Polish school?

PARNES: It was, it was doing, well, I suppose I was about ten years, eleven years old. It was during the war, the First World War. And I don't remember going much there to school, but because it wasn't a pleasant experience going to that school, you know. You were frightened all the time. You know, the people, the Polish people never liked Jews, you know. You're a minority, you know. They take advantage of you, you know. So you always live in fear, you know. So you really can't learn much, you know. Until, you know, the great day came, "We're going to America."
(he laughs)

FEENEY: Let me ask you, what did your father do in Poland?

PARNES: What he did? My father worked in a bakery and he had a brother in this country, so he brought him over.

FEENEY: Did you ever work in the bakery with your father?

PARNES: No. I was too young because, mostly no, because my father was in the army in 19, eh, when the First World War broke out he went to the army. In 1914 till 1918 he was captured as a prisoner, and the war ended in 1918 and he was in Italy at that time. Then, till he came home, you know. In 1919 he came home and I think in 1920 he came to America. And then his brother brought him over, that is, my uncle. And finally my, they got together with my mother's sister, my aunt. And in 1921 they brought me, my mother and my sister over.

FEENEY: Do you remember the war touching your town at all, the First World War? Did it affect your town at all? Was any of the

fighting in your area?

PARNES: Oh, sure, I remember the First World War. We were refugees. We were, we had to leave the town that we lived in and we went to a different town. And then we had some relatives in a different town, and then they had no room for us, we had to come back again to our town. It was, really, it was a rough life, a rough life. As a child, you know, I remember because we had to, like you see, like you saw in the Iraq war, you know, these refugees, the Kurds, you know, they were carrying the children, you know, in the rain, in the mud and all that. You know, I remember that. You know, the bad things you always remember. Somehow they stay with you, you know. And until we reached 1921, you know, and we got some money from America and . . .

FEENEY: And you decided to come. You say that you tend to remember the bad things that happened. Do you remember some of the good things that happened when you were a child?

PARNES: Where?

FEENEY: In Poland.

PARNES: Good things? I don't know. I can't remember any good things because most of my life was during the war years. You know, you couldn't get anything. You didn't have. You were always hungry. You didn't have a, you know, nothing to eat. You barely had something to eat. There was nothing, nothing around. Anybody, if you had a button from a coat it was a big thing. You know, you had a button. I mean, a little box for matches, you had. You know, you was a child. You hold on to it. You think it's something. But still in all there were people that had things,

you know. As far as the sugar, you know. These things disappeared. Nothing, everything disappears, you know, in the war time. You can't get nothing, you have nothing. You can't get a, even a piece of bread. You know, you had the black bread.

And when I reached, when we came to Belgium, you know, before we boarded the boat, that's the time we had white bread, you know, sliced white bread. Oh, what a luxury that thing was. I was afraid to eat it. It was a big thing, you know. Because you were always hungry, you know. Because during the war there was nothing there.

FEENEY: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

PARNES: A sister, yeah.

FEENEY: One sister? So it was just two children, then, and your mother.

PARNES: And my mother, yeah.

FEENEY: And you received money from your father to come to America.

PARNES: Yeah.

FEENEY: Do you remember how you traveled to board the ship? How you went from Poland?

PARNES: Well, it's like, you know, it's hard to, eh. Sure we traveled by train to Belgium, and there we got the boat.

FEENEY: Do you remember that train ride?

PARNES: The boat. I remember the boat. I got on the boat, Lapland, on that boat. We stayed about a few, about a week or so in Antwerp before we boarded a boat. And naturally it took three weeks for the boat to come here, and all the three weeks I was sick. I

couldn't move, seasick. I couldn't eat. I was in very bad shape.

FEENEY: What did you do when you were on board the ship to pass the time?

PARNES: To pass the time on the ship? You were just laying on the floor, that's all, in third class.

FEENEY: Like down in steerage?

PARNES: Steerage, whatever you call it, you know, with all the immigrants.

FEENEY: So there were a lot of immigrants, a lot of people on the ship.

PARNES: Naturally, sure, a lot of immigrants. But finally we got here. When we got to Ellis Island then it, you know, it's hard to remember. After all, it's exactly seventy years.

FEENEY: Well, let me ask you this. When you came into the Harbor did you by any chance go up on deck and see New York as you were coming in, or see the Statue of Liberty?

PARNES: No, no. You don't know, you don't know. You see, after all, you know, I was fourteen years old, thirteen-and-a-half, fourteen. You're still ignorant. You know, you're like, today's children, they're eight years old, they're smart like anything. In them days, you know, you have no education. You don't know nothing, you don't learn anything. You know, you come from a, and it's a big change, you know, that you have. You know, from a small town, from nothing, you know, you come into a place. You know, you never saw an ocean or anything like that, you know, ships, harbor, whoever saw anything. So, you know, your face is here, the harbor is here, you could look the other way, you don't even

know there's a harbor or a Statue of Liberty, you know. But afterwards.

FEENEY: So do you remember coming to Ellis Island?

PARNES: I remember being here, you know. I remember when my father came to take us, you know, when we left. He took us to Brooklyn.

FEENEY: So you were here in July or August of 1921? The month?

PARNES: Yeah, yeah.

FEENEY: It was that summer in the middle of 1921.

PARNES: 1921, sure.

FEENEY: Do you remember being here, like, with a lot of people? Do you remember being in the Registry Room full of people waiting?

PARNES: No, yeah. But, you know, you don't know. You don't know what's going on. You're like a frightened animal, you know.

(he laughs) They take you, you know. After all, it was just with my mother, you know, when my mother took me I went, you know. And she also, you know, she didn't know anything after all. Them days, you know, people today are educated, you know. They know more, they see more. Over there you don't see anything, you don't know anything.

FEENEY: Do you remember any medical examinations?

PARNES: No, that I don't remember. You mean being examined here?

FEENEY: Yes.

PARNES: No.

FEENEY: Do you remember any of the inspectors asking you any questions?

PARNES: Nah. Even if they asked me I wouldn't, (he laughs), I couldn't answer them anyway. Because, after all, I was a kid, a child.

FEENEY: Do you remember having a meal here? Do you remember eating here?
Did you have . . .

PARNES: Yeah, we ate, we ate. Yes.

FEENEY: Do you remember what? Some more white bread, maybe? Do you remember what you had to eat?

PARNES: Nah, I couldn't remember. The only thing I remember, when they took us to my aunt's house in Brooklyn, when I came in, you know, in the kitchen, and they had a, they didn't have no refrigerator at that time, ice box, you know. And on the ice box was a bowl of sugar, lump sugar. And I thought they must be millionaires if they got that sugar, you know. And I asked for a piece, you know, they gave me. And I chewed it up so fast, you know. Sugar is such a luxury.

FEENEY: Do you remember leaving Ellis Island? Did your father come and pick you up?

PARNES: Yes.

FEENEY: How long had, how long was it since you had seen your father?

PARNES: You mean here? How long, well, he came here in 1920. He was here a year, you know. And . . .

FEENEY: So you were happy to see him then?

PARNES: Then. We came in '21, a year later.

FEENEY: And do you remember him picking you up here at Ellis Island?

PARNES: Yeah, sure. Picking us up, because I remember he took a taxicab, in a taxi. We went over the Brooklyn Bridge. It was very exciting to go to Brooklyn, you know. He took us in a taxi, and he brought us grapes, a bag, a plain bag of grapes. Oh. Whoever saw grapes? Yeah, they did have grapes in our town, but in the drugstore. The druggist man. They had it in the window, you know, in the straw baskets, you know, with confetti on it, you know. Like, it was for show mostly, because they don't have that in Poland. It was imported probably from Italy or from Hungary, from where, you know. But nobody ever buys that, you know. It's too expensive. The same thing with an orange. They had oranges, too. But, you know. (he laughs) You can't. You don't buy an orange. You only, you bought, maybe, you peel off and they let you smell it. You put it on the clothes so the clothes can smell. You have it. And they had everything here in Brooklyn. My God! So we were in the cab and we were eating the grapes out of the bag, you know. What a ball, I'm telling you.

FEENEY: And you say you went to your aunt's house first? You went to your aunt's house?

PARNES: My aunt's house, yeah. They had their own house, and we stayed there because we had no apartment or anything, so we stayed with them. We stayed with them.

FEENEY: How long did you stay with them?

PARNES: You know, a few months, until, in fact, they took me to school there in that P.S. 158 in Brooklyn, and that was in Shepard Avenue. And we stayed there, and. But when I came to school, as

I told you before, I didn't want to go. I tried my best not to go to school. I was afraid, afraid.

FEENEY: Why?

PARNES: And when I came to school they finally took me into the class and I saw the kids were laughing. They were laughing, so, you know. And I sat down and I went for a day or two. Then I found out that the teacher was a Jewish teacher, Miss Newfeld. I'll never forget her name. Miss Newfeld was her name, the teacher. Oh, what a relief, you know. (he laughs) In the Catholic school I went to there was no such a thing as a Jewish teacher.

FEENEY: So it was a Catholic school in Poland that you attended?

PARNES: Well, that's public school. It's Catholic school. It's one thousand percent Catholic, you know. There's no public school like you have here. Then when I came into school I looked around. I didn't see that . . . (he gestures)

FEENEY: A crucifix.

PARNES: Yeah. So I was sort of, you know, you feel more relaxed. Then finally after a few months we moved to the city, you know. We got an apartment and I went to Public School 188.

FEENEY: Now you were fourteen at the time.

PARNES: Yeah.

FEENEY: Fourteen years old. What grade did you start in school?

PARNES: Well, in Brooklyn they didn't, I started with the kids, you know, with the children, you know. I was the tallest one, because I had, the little children, I had, they had chinning, you know,

with a bar. So I had to lift them up, you know, to the bar. But when I moved to the city from Brooklyn to Manhattan I went to Public School 188. That's on Houston Street, Houston and Lewis.

There they had a foreign class, because there was all, a lot of foreigners were coming in at that time when I came. So they, the whole class was foreign boys, all foreigners. You know, big boys taller than me, you know. And . . .

FEENEY: How did you learn English?

PARNES: Well, naturally they teach you English. A kid, you learn fast, you know. In the street, in the school you learn English fast.

FEENEY: Was this the first time, though, that they were teaching you English in this new school?

PARNES: Sure, in that foreign class. You know, they teach you, they teach you English in a few years. And before you know it I was sixteen and they said, "Go learn a trade." School, ahh. Still you're poor, you know. (he laughs) So you had to go and work in a, in a shop.

FEENEY: So what, do you remember what your first job was?

PARNES: My first job, yes, in an importing house in the millinery line or something. Ladies hats, you know. When I got my working papers when I was sixteen.

FEENEY: What did you do? Were you in manufacturing or in shipping?

PARNES: Yeah. Well, they were manufacturing hats, you know, ladies hats, felt hats, you know.

FEENEY: So you made hats for them? Did you make the hats?

PARNES: Yeah, sure, ladies hats. Then I went into men's hats, you know, when I was seventeen, eighteen years already. So, you know, when you're strong you feel, you work for ten dollars a week. And I worked in a men's hat store, men's straw hats on Broadway and Grand Street, it was. And they worked three hours, three shifts, around the clock. They could never make enough hats. You know, everybody was wearing a hat. You never see anybody go without a hat. Everybody was wearing a hat, derbies. In summertime naturally we worked in straw hats, you know. You take it off, ah. (he laughs)

FEENEY: And then after that what sort of work did you do? Did you stay in the hat business for many years?

PARNES: Then I went into the fur business, furs. You know, you worked on fur coats, you know. The main thing was, you know, them days you looked only for factory work. You know, if you had a trade, you know. So you worked. You worked piece work and you made more money, you know. But nobody ever looked for a government job, you know, like in a post office or anything. Nobody ever wanted those jobs. Who needs, a man that worked in the subway was getting thirty dollars a week or twenty-eight dollars a week, and if you worked in a factory you worked piece work you made seventy-five dollars a week.

FEENEY: What about your family? Your father, for instance. Did he find work here in America?

PARNES: Well, my father worked but then he was sick, you know. He couldn't work much, you know. He became sick, and he was sick for a long time, you know, and all that. So that's how it goes.

So enough!

FEENEY: Just a little bit more. Did you ever get married, sir?

PARNES: Huh?

FEENEY: Did you ever get married?

PARNES: No, no. Because we always had problems, you know, a lot of problems all the time, you know. Parents, mother was sick, father was sick, and you always had to work and make a living, you know.

FEENEY: Did you support your parents, then?

PARNES: Sure. You had to all the time to work, because.

FEENEY: And what about your sister?

PARNES: Well, she got married, you know, and has kids, grandchildren and all that. So now they're sick, my brother-in-law, my sister and all that, you know. And I'm sick, too. I just took my medication, sure.

FEENEY: What were your impressions going through Ellis Island today?

PARNES: Yeah, it's interesting, but I didn't see much yet. I have to look around yet.

FEENEY: Did it bring back memories for you?

PARNES: Well, I don't have much memories of it, but I remember being here. I remember, you know. It was, because I saw the black man here. You know, it must have been working here, you know. And I looked. And I remember a lot of people, always a lot of people around, you know. But if I stayed on Ellis Island, I don't

remember if I stayed here a day or two or three. I don't remember that. But I remember when my father came for us, so that was it.

FEENEY: Are you happy that you made the decision to come to America?

PARNES: Since they took me sure I'm happy, of course. I wouldn't want to be in Poland. I wouldn't even want to go today to Poland if you paid me. There's always bad memories, you know. I've been other places, but not in Poland.

FEENEY: Well, Mr. Parnes, I want to thank you very much for taking your time and sitting down with us.

PARNES: Yeah, you're welcome. What else can I tell you? (he laughs)

FEENEY: This is Brian Feeney, then, for the National Park Service.