

EI-071

JACK (YANKEL) AVRUCH

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the UKRAINE, 1920
AGE 19

PORT: DANZIG

RESIDENCES: RATNE
CHELSEA, MA

LEVINE: . . . Avruch, in North Miami Beach, Florida. It's August 24th, 1991 and Mr. Avruch came from Russia in 1920 through Ellis Island at the age of twenty. Okay. Well, Mr. Avruch, will you tell first where you were born.

AVRUCH: I was born in the Ukraine.

LEVINE: In what town?

AVRUCH: Uh, Ratne, near Lutsk, near Kovel.

LEVINE: Could you spell the name of the town?

AVRUCH: Ratne? Yeah. R-A-T-N-E. Ratne.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And it was near what town?

AVRUCH: Near Brestlitovsk.

LEVINE: Could you spell that one, please?

AVRUCH: No. (Dr. Levine laughs) Brestlitovsk. That's an old Polish town. It's near the Polish border.

LEVINE: Now, the town that you lived in, was this a small town, a village?

AVRUCH: Uh, a small town.

LEVINE: And what was the town like? What did people do there for a living?

AVRUCH: It was a plain ordinary town, little business stores, merchants. It's a regular, usually small town.

LEVINE: And was it farming there, or . . .

AVRUCH: It was a lot of farms all around.

LEVINE: What kind of farms?

AVRUCH: All around was farms.

LEVINE: And did you live in a house.

AVRUCH: A house.

LEVINE: And what was the house like?

AVRUCH: It was only houses. There was no apartments, big

apartments. It was only small individual houses.

LEVINE: Could you describe the house?

AVRUCH: A small, little house with one, two, three rooms in there, and we lived there. My grandfather lived there.

LEVINE: And what was his name, your grandfather's name?

AVRUCH: Morris Moishe Goss.

LEVINE: Okay. And your grandfather, did your grandmother live with you also?

AVRUCH: Yeah, at that time when I was born. Then we moved out to a village.

LEVINE: Now, were you the first child?

AVRUCH: No, no.

LEVINE: When you were born your mother and father were also living there.

AVRUCH: Yes.

LEVINE: And what were their names?

AVRUCH: Their names are Chaya and Bella. Chaya, my father. Bella is my mother.

LEVINE: What was your mother's maiden name?

AVRUCH: Goss.

LEVINE: Okay. And your brothers and sisters who were there?

AVRUCH: I had two sisters that they immigrated to the United States when I was a little kid.

LEVINE: Oh, so they came before you did.

AVRUCH: That's right. And my two brothers and another sister was there while I was there. And when I was already growing up it was at the time of the war, of the Revolution, 1918.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, first, would you say your brothers' and sisters' names?

AVRUCH: Yes. Fishel, Folick and Eva, Chava, my sister.

LEVINE: Now, you had two sisters who came over.

AVRUCH: Over here. And one sister was there when I was born, when I was a young kid. We lived in a village while I was growing up.

LEVINE: Now, did you say the names of your two sisters who had come over?

AVRUCH: Yes. Bess and Rose.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, let's see. So what did your father do for work while you were there?

AVRUCH: While I was growing up he was working for a rich farmer. We had, at that time, a farmer, he was in charge, he was, he had all the villages around for miles and miles, all around. It belonged to him. And the sharecroppers worked on the land. And my father was the head man for this farmer. We called it a poitz. Poitz, that means he is the gentleman of all, gentleman farmer you would call it here.

LEVINE: I see. So he was . . .

AVRUCH: And then they made him the judge for the district, so he was the judge, he was the gentleman farmer from all the villages, and what he said goes.

LEVINE: So he had . . .

AVRUCH: My father worked for him.

LEVINE: I see.

AVRUCH: He took care of all his business.

LEVINE: So your father had a very good position compared with

most people.

AVRUCH: Yeah. We made a living. And when I grow up I was maybe sixteen or fifteen years, we had a creamery run. We had the cows from this farmer, and we paid them so much a year to own the cows. We didn't own them, but we rented them, and we milked them and made butter, cheese to sell them. So at that time I took care of the farm, of the creamery. I had two girls that they were working, they were milking the cows, bringing in the milk. We had a little machine that divided the cream and the sour milk and we made butter, we made cheese. And I lived a good life when I was a youngster.

LEVINE: What was it like in the town? What . . .

AVRUCH: It was farms, farms all around.

LEVINE: And did you see any, now, when the Revolution came . . .

AVRUCH: Oh, when I grew up, yes. I lived through Denikem Petruvla. Petruvla was the patriot of Ukraine.

LEVINE: And what did you see, first hand, of the Revolution?

AVRUCH: What I saw, killing. We were afraid for our lives. And at that time Germany was, before the Revolution Germany was

in the war with them, and after they left the Revolution started. In fact, I wanted to, my sister send out papers, at that time, before the war, before the Revolution started, for me to come. Because I was, I was next. I was the second born from the older one. Fishel was the first, the older. I was next. But they send up papers to me that I should come to the United States.

LEVINE: Now, when did they go? When did they go to the United States?

AVRUCH: They came here maybe 1912 or something like that.

LEVINE: And how old were they? Were they already grown?

AVRUCH: They were older than me. They were much older.

LEVINE: So they had in mind all along to send for you once they got . . .

AVRUCH: Papers that I could come, and tickets were on the way. But when the Revolution started and it didn't start in our little town, it started further in Rovna. That was an overnight ride with a wagon.

LEVINE: And that's R-O-V-N-A?

AVRUCH: Yeah. And I wanted, I didn't know. I was young. I

wanted to do something. So I went to Rovna to enlist in the Red Army. Because at that time when I was young I thought that this is the only answer for Jews. Jews wouldn't be afraid of freedom, so I wanted to enlist in the army. When I went there overnight with a wagon that was going there, like, so when I . . .

LEVINE: So you got a ride with somebody that was going there.

AVRUCH: Yeah. So when I came there I didn't like it because I saw what's going on.

LEVINE: What did you see?

AVRUCH: I met there one guy from my city that I knew him as a kid, that he was from crook, a gangster. He didn't care for nothing. And I was from the better class. When I came I saw him and he says, "Oh, good. Here, come in, and you can do anything you want." He had two guns on him. And, "It's freedom. You go in the store and take what you want. You could get all the women you want." Oh, so I thought to myself, "If it's good for him it won't be good for me." So I turned back, and when I came to my mother, I say, "Goodbye, Mother. I'm going to America." I didn't have a penny to my name, and my mother couldn't give me a penny either.

LEVINE: And your sisters hadn't sent your papers.

AVRUCH: That's right. So I knew that, then the Revolution already was on. I knew on the way is papers for me to come, tickets. So I figured I'll go to Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland. And over there I'll go in the consul, and I'll ask him for the papers, maybe I'll get the papers there. The way I went there to Warsaw, I didn't have no money. When I went to the city, to the little town that I was born, we had a wagon left there before we moved. So I took down the wagon from the attic and I sold it, and I had twenty something there. Enough money to get me to Warsaw. So I went out on the road and the Germans were evacuated. They were going home. And I had a ride with them. I hitched a ride with them to Lutsk. No, Brestlitovsk. That was on the way. Brestlitovsk, I went down, and I bought a ticket to Warsaw. When I came to Warsaw and I went in, I didn't have money, just a couple of rubles. I went in some hotel. There was a lot at that time, a lot of people going to the United States. They were running. And the Red Army was right in back of me, running. When I went in the consul to find out where my papers are, they said they went to my home. They haven't got it. So I'm stuck. I didn't have no money, no tickets, no papers. But they were evacuating the people from Warsaw, all the refugees that they were in Russia, to Danzig,

Germany. So I went with them. I didn't need a ticket because the whole mob went and I went with them. And on the way I helped people there, I was young. I didn't have no luggage. But some women, mostly women with kids, had luggage, so I helped them out, and they were after me. When we came to Danzig what can I do? I didn't, so it's my luck. There's a man from the United States there, agent. He came to help out people to come to the United States. And he was from the same city that my sister lived, Chelsea, near Boston. It's a part of . . .

LEVINE: I know where it . . .

AVRUCH: You know where. So I told him the story where my sisters had lived there, and they shipped me the ticket, but it's lost on the way. And if you would give me a ticket and I'll pay you when I come there, my sister. It so happened that my sister was married, they had a good name, Rabanovich, and they knew them. He said, "Yes." So after a while, it wasn't right away, but after a few weeks, we were there in barracks, all the refugees. And, by the way, I met my wife there. Not her. She's my second wife.

LEVINE: Really. Now, how long were you in Danzig in the barracks?

AVRUCH: In Danzig I was maybe about three or four weeks.

LEVINE: And the steamship company was putting, had the barracks?

AVRUCH: No. We waited for the steamship company. When the ship, he told me, when there's a ship due here, when the ship will come I'll give you the ticket and you'll go. And you did, well, I suffered. My wife, she was a young girl and I was young, nineteen years, nineteen-and-a-half. She helped me out. We used to go at night and she bought me a beer because I didn't have. And the women there I helped out, this one give me something, this one give me something. And I pulled through. And I, when I came on the way on the ship I also did the same thing. I was a strong, young, everybody, all the women were sick on the way, you know, on the boat. I don't know, we were travelling maybe three or four weeks. I don't remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of the ship?

AVRUCH: No, I forgot it.

LEVINE: But it was a three or four week voyage. It was a rough voyage?

AVRUCH: Oh, yes. It was rough. I was the only one that came out for dinner, for food, because I was hungry. I was thin as that. (he gestures) When I came up to eat, oh, boy, food.

LEVINE: How did they serve the food? Now, were you in steerage, or were you in a cabin?

AVRUCH: No, a cabin.

LEVINE: A cabin.

AVRUCH: A cabin, I think. Two or three in a cabin.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, did you go in the dining room?

AVRUCH: We went upstairs to the dining room. It was a place with long tables. It wasn't napkin and tablecloths. It was a long table, and they brought in herring, potatoes, and there was a family there with kids, and the kids were so hungry, everybody was hungry. But the kids, so they said to the mother, "Momishu, hut, momishu." Momishu is "Mama." So in Yiddish, in there, in Polish, they said, "Momishu, hut, hut." They were grabbing the potatoes. And I went through and we came, we came down in Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you came?

AVRUCH: Yeah, sure.

LEVINE: Did you know about it before that? Did you, were you

looking for it?

AVRUCH: No. I knew a little about it. So when I saw, we came in after suffering for two or three weeks, we came out on the deck and we saw buildings, the Statue of Liberty. And at that time Ellis Island needed, you can't go down before somebody's responsible for you. If nobody's there you've got to have twenty-five dollars on you. I didn't have it.

LEVINE: And your sister, did your sister come to meet you?

AVRUCH: No. My sister didn't even know I'm coming. I couldn't, she knew I'm somewheres on the way, trying to come. But where, what, they didn't know.

LEVINE: So what happened?

AVRUCH: So when this woman with a little girl, and I helped her out all the time. She says, "Yankel." Yankel is my Yiddish name. "Don't worry. As soon as my husband will come in to meet me, I'll get twenty-five dollars and I'll give to you." I said, "Oh, you'll forget. You'll get all excited. You'll forget all about it." And I was standing there worrying what will I do. And while I was talking to him they called their name. Her husband was downstairs waiting for her. And it didn't take five minutes to call my name, because she says that she's got the

money for me. She give me the twenty-five dollars and I showed it and went over. I got a picture from the stand in Ellis Island where I was standing there with the man. How I came to Boston I don't remember. I know, I remember in New York I went in on the train, on the subway, I remember that, that I came in. There was me. Oh, underground train, and it was so light and so, I couldn't get over that. I was excited. But how I came to Boston I don't know. And I came to North Station. That's two stations in Boston, South Station and North Station. Why in North Station? I suppose they knew that I had to come to Chelsea. That was near north, was, I came there. I went out in the street. They let me off. How they brought me there, I don't remember. I imagine it was representative from the, from organizations like HIAS. Now I can't speak. You've got to speak and find out how am I going to Chelsea. I went out, looked around, and I see the guy that sells papers, looks like a Jew. So I went over to him. "(Yiddish word) Yiddish?" So he says, "Yeah, Chelsea. You're going to Chelsea. Over there, the streetcar, you take." So I went over to the conductor. I told him, "Chelsea Square. Chelsea, Chelsea." He says, "All right. Sit down." When we came into Chelsea Square he says, "Chelsea" to me. "Move." I couldn't talk, and I couldn't understand. So I went off and I started walking. Broadway, Chelsea, I don't know. Broadway, the main street. I walk and I see a guy come

in. Now, a Russian young boy, I had the street number, the street from Chelsea where my sister lived. But I knew it, I didn't have it written out. How would you pronounce Jefferson Avenue? You would pronounce Jeffer-SON Street, right? That's in Russian. So I said, "Jeffer-SON Street." They look at me. They didn't know, they didn't understand. So I went to another guy, until I find a guy that looks like a Jew. You're going to Jeffer-SON Street. So he looks at me, "Jeffer-SON." So he was an immigrant too, so he understood better. He says, "Yes. (Yiddish)" I think it's way on the hills, and Chelsea had a big hill. So he says, "Walk straight, go. Go straight." So I walked along, and I came and I see the street name Jefferson Avenue. So naturally I understood. So I walked into that street. And my luck, 31 Jefferson Avenue. I came, and the "1" fell down. It was an older house, just the "3" on there. I said, "Well, it can't be 3. I need 31." Well, there was a little store there. Years ago there were little stores. Not like today. I went in and I tell them, "Rabanovich." "Yeah," he says. "The third house." They knew the name, and they knew where. Now I knew, I made up my mind when I come in, I didn't tell them it's me. My sister left me when I was a kid. She couldn't recognize me. I'll tell them that I met their brother and I know about their brother and talked to him, and I made up in my mind how I would do. I went in, I knew that I shouldn't

go to the front. So I knew I'd go to the back. I went in through the back entrance. And it was on a Friday night. My sister was cleaning the house and preparing for Shabbat. And I opened, I knocked the door and she says, "Come in." And I walk in. My mouth closed, and I couldn't. "Ahh." Just like that. I couldn't talk, I was so excited. And it maybe took five minutes. My sister looked and me, and I looked at her. Oh. She says, "Oh, Yankel!" Then it started the whole night. And my other sister was working. It was Friday morning. She called my sister, my brother-in-law came running down. And the two sisters didn't know what to do with me. I was the younger one, and I was so thin. Meanwhile she was, she had the challah. She baked, she left the challah and she started getting busy to make me breakfast, to make me food. And when she came back she looked for the challah. Before she came back, I ate up the challah. I was hungry.

LEVINE: Wow. What a story.

AVRUCH: When I went down from the ship they were selling bananas. I bought one. I had a couple of pennies. I bought two bananas. And I looked at them, I didn't know how to eat, to peel them or to bite them or what to do with it. So I saw what the other guy, how he did, he started peeling. So I ate the two bananas. That's all what I had the day before, and so I was

hungry. And they started working on me and boy, in two weeks I gained about twenty pounds in two weeks.

LEVINE: Wow. That's amazing. So when you were back in the old country were you a religious family?

AVRUCH: My father, naturally, was religious. I wasn't. I wasn't religious.

LEVINE: Now, how was it that your sisters came over? And your mother and father, did they ever come over?

AVRUCH: They came over, they also came, my sister, the older sister, a young, beautiful girl, there was no future for her. We had a cousin here and he was a bachelor, and he was an older man. And when he saw the picture of that beautiful girl, so he had an idea, he'll take her and he'll have a wife. And he did.

LEVINE: Did she marry him?

AVRUCH: She wouldn't maybe under other circumstances, but when he gave her the word and he took her out, she wouldn't change her mind. So he married her. And then my sister took out the next sister, after a couple of years. And when I came I was ready to take out my brother, because I paid off already for my ticket and I was ready to save and take out my, we wrote letters back and forth. And at that time they wasn't sure that they

wanted, but they would come if it would take no time. But Hitler came in and it was too late. So he took care of all of the family. My two brothers and my sister, they were married, they had kids already, and he took care of all of them. So this is my story.

LEVINE: So what did you do, then? Did you stay in Chelsea?

AVRUCH: I started, after a week they took me right away and bought me clothes. And when I came in in the store, Saturday, that week, they took me to shop. So I heard Polish talk, a woman who was Polish. A lot of Polish lived there. A woman come in the store, and she talked Polish. When I hear that, I got so excited, so mad, I wanted to kill her, because I hear that Polish, the language, and I had a lot of suffering from that. So after a while I started looking for a job and I found a job. I was making twenty-five dollars a week.

LEVINE: What kind of job did you find?

AVRUCH: Millinery. And I worked there for a while. I had a store, you know, and I met the girl that I met in Danzig. She went to East Boston.

LEVINE: Now, where was she from?

AVRUCH: Oh, from Russia, a different city. And I met her

there, and then I went to see her after a few weeks. I had the address where she went to East Boston.

LEVINE: Now, did she go on the same ship?

AVRUCH: No. She went on another ship. And when I came in to see her she looked at me, she says, "Oh, Yankel, you are swollen. What happened with you?" Because I gained weight right off. So I kept in touch with her, and you know how young people are. I fell in love with her, and after, only after three years we got married.

LEVINE: And did you have children?

AVRUCH: Sure.

LEVINE: And what were your children's names, what are your children's names?

AVRUCH: Now is Frank Avruch, and why don't I show a picture of them. Frank and, uh, and Evelyn. I had right away. A year, 23rd, I got married, 24th I had Evelyn, my daughter. And then after a couple of years I had Frank and we suffered, suffered. I had all kind of business. I jumped from this one and that until the last thirty years, and my retirement I had a good business, very good. I had a trucking business.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: And did you stay in Massachusetts?

AVRUCH: I stayed in Massachusetts till 1970. I came here, I met my wife here. I moved in on a condo next door to her. She had her husband, I had my wife. Her husband a year later died, an accident, and my wife died first, and that's how it is. I needed a shoulder to cry about my wife, so she had the shoulder for me. And after a while we got married. It didn't take long. We got married in '70.

LEVINE: Now, can you remember back when you, before you came to the (break in tape)

AVRUCH: That the United States is a golden medina. Do you know what that means?

LEVINE: Well, I have an idea, but you can, go ahead.

AVRUCH: In Yiddish is a golden land, a medina, a land. But when I came into Chelsea the second day my sister took me in to the library. And when I went in it was a small library and Chelsea's a small town. Then I showed books, Jewish books, a whole shelf. I was so excited, ooh! All books, so much books, and all in Yiddish. Because in Yiddish we couldn't have this in

our, where we lived. So naturally I was excited at that time.

LEVINE: You didn't know English when you first came. You did not know any English when you first came.

AVRUCH: Oh, no.

LEVINE: No. And did you, how did you learn it, then? Did you go, you didn't go to, did you go to night school, or did you . . .

AVRUCH: No. My sister had two boys, two little kids. One is little, one is older. And she had a cousin living with her here that he was from Portland, and he was there living with my sister. He was going in college in Harvard. So he started talking to me. "Now, Say 'I go to sleep.' (Yiddish.) Say it in English." "I go to sleep. I go to sleep." I do this, I talked to myself. Then after a while I picked it up, I picked it up. And I did the mistake, one mistake I made. Naturally can't do nothing. When I came I should go to school and get my education. This I didn't do.

LEVINE: Well, you worked.

AVRUCH: That's what I am, I was, because when you're young you think your mind works differently. You think different. When I was young I was only thinking about girls, I wanted to see my

girl, to see and how to go meet other girls. I didn't think about, never mind all this stuff. Go and educate. And I was, my character was, I was ashamed. I was going in the school and people talking. So naturally I should go and I shouldn't mind this, but I did, and I didn't go to school at all.

LEVINE: Were you mostly around other immigrants when you came over? Were there mostly other people who had come?

AVRUCH: Yes. It was mostly, a lot of immigrants.

LEVINE: So you could get along in speaking.

AVRUCH: Yeah. Naturally we spoke in Yiddish. A lot of people started, "Don't talk Yiddish. Talk English." You know, get used to it. So I did.

LEVINE: So did you use the library? Did you go to . . .

AVRUCH: Yeah, sure, sure. And you go by, go in the street. You go through a policeman and you're not afraid to go out through a policeman. Over there when you saw police you were shivering, you were afraid, because you find something on you. But over here I came in Chelsea, I saw all this freedom. You go by, you don't, you're not afraid. So naturally it was wonderful to live through. And I started going, taking the street car, going in town in Boston and getting acquainted. And we had all

immigrants that they, we had groups. We never went alone. It was a whole group.

LEVINE: Did you have a club, a social club that you belonged to?

AVRUCH: Yeah, a Yiddish club.

LEVINE: And what kinds of things did you do in the club, or with the club? What did you do? What did the club do?

AVRUCH: We just talked. At that time we come in, and we talked to discuss and read books. Now people get together, they play cards right away.

LEVINE: Or watch TV.

AVRUCH: At that time we didn't.

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

AVRUCH: We were with ideas, with Yiddish and, oh. We had a lot of ideas.

LEVINE: Was it an exciting time, an exciting time? It was an exciting time for you?

AVRUCH: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Well, just to get back to Ellis Island for a minute. Can you, do you have any impressions that stay with you?

AVRUCH: I don't remember. We, I didn't stay much in Ellis Island. As I said, for that woman, the man was waiting for her. He knew when the ship is coming, and he knew, so he was waiting. I was, I think, one day in Ellis Island.

LEVINE: So you slept, did you sleep over?

AVRUCH: Yeah, I think so. I don't remember. And I went over, I recognized the stands that the, it was lines and lines all over. People in the thousands, all over, with lines and with tags on them. Everybody wore a tag. The name and where, what.

LEVINE: And do you remember the medical exam?

AVRUCH: I went through the medical exam and naturally I went through there right away, okay. They gave me a tag, I'm okay, that's right. I could get off. But there was a lot of cry, I remember.

LEVINE: What?

AVRUCH: Cries, people were crying because they didn't go through medical. They were retained. And they were difference, they had to go and do a different line. And I was free right

away.

LEVINE: Were you afraid? Were you afraid to think maybe you would . . .

AVRUCH: Yes, I was afraid. How will I go to my sister's? How will I get her. And I wanted to surprise her. Naturally I was afraid. You go out in the street and you look and you can't talk, you can't ask anything. But it's, you ask in Yiddish and you'll get an answer. Not the first one, the second, third people, you'll get it.

LEVINE: Do you think there are some ways that you have about you or qualities that you have that are a carry-over from the old country? Any ways that you have kept that you took from your growing up over there?

AVRUCH: I don't know. I don't know. With the ideas, I had a lot. I kept my ideas. I thought that Communism is a good thing. It's good for the working people. It's especially good for the Jews. It will be freedom. But after a while, when I get older and I saw what's doing, I went away from that.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds like you were very idealistic. I mean . . .

AVRUCH: I was. I used to be.

LEVINE: Yeah.

AVRUCH: And even now when we moved in here, the same thing.

LEVINE: Okay. So this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, thanking Mr. Jack Avruch for a wonderful interview.

AVRUCH: Thank you.

LEVINE: Thank you.