

EI-751

SAMUEL BERNSTEIN

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SHIP:

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Okay, this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I'm here in Sunrise, Florida, and I'm with Mr. Sam Bernstein who came from Poland when he was seven years of age in 1914. I've just interviewed his sister, Molly Schuster, and we're in her home and today is—today Mr. Bernstein is eight-nine of years of age. I'm looking forward to anything you can remember, which I have the feeling is a lot.

BERNSTEIN: Okay.

LEVINE: But anyway, if you'd start by just saying your birth date and where in Poland you were born.

BERNSTEIN: My birth date is April—April 6th, 1907. I was born in Yanow, Lubelski. Y-A-N-O-W capital L-U-B-E-L-S-K-I.

LEVINE: Okay.

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BERNSTEIN: That's the Polish equivalent of Lablene [PH], Poland.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

BERNSTEIN: In other words, Yanow was a suburb of Lablene.

LEVINE: Okay, great. Now, were you in Yanow—Yanow up until the time you left, did you live there?

BERNSTEIN: We lived there until we came—we were going to America.

LEVINE: Okay, what do you remember about Yanow? What kind of a—was it a little town? A big city?

BERNSTEIN: It was a very small town and it was a mixed—mixed—mixed ethnic groups. There were Polish people. There were Russian people and there were Jewish people and the family—my family lived in the garret of my mother's family's holdings. It was a—it was a wooden four compartment building that housed three or four of the families who were all—all brothers of my mother.

LEVINE: When you say garret, is that like an attic?

BERNSTEIN: That's like an attic. Like an attic with a pointed ceiling. There was a stove up there. We baked up there. Mother cooked up there and that's where we lived and it was surrounded by a big, vacant yard where the men—the men—the Oliver—the family name was Oliver. My mother's maiden name was Oliver and these were three brothers, four brothers who lived in that area. One brother was Yaina [PH], who lived with his wife Laila [PH] and the children.

LEVINE: Do you remember any experiences with the—

BERNSTEIN: I'm going to tell you all kinds of experiences.

LEVINE: Okay.

BERNSTEIN: And one was Mia, who lived with Hannah and a little humor of a three or four year old boy. My Mima [PH] Hannah, my Aunt Hannah was deaf and I would say to my mother, "Isn't fortunate that you can break wind and my Aunt Hannah cannot hear it?" The other brother was Schlemmer [PH], and her name, his wife's name I don't remember, but Schlemmer [PH] was crippled and he had a shoe repair shop and a shoemaking store in the front. And

he would make shoes for the soldiers and for other people. And these brothers, these Oliver brothers that I tell you about where horse traders and they had mature children already, and in this yard, in this big yard, there would be big fights between the three brothers that would go on and they wouldn't—and my mother would yell out from the top, "You ought to be ashamed, three brothers fighting like that." This is what went on many, many times during the time that I was there.

LEVINE: What would they fight about?

BERNSTEIN: They would fight about this one swung this deal. This one did him out of that deal. They were never—they were always at odds with each other. And it was a big row and the sons would interfere. Their respective sons would fight for their parents. And to get on further, I told you my Uncle Yaina and Aunt Laila had four daughters. Now, in Europe there is no outhouse or at least it's certainly not indoor plumbing and so if these girls had to go out at night, the only one who could go with them was a young man or somebody because a young man can drive Satan away, because they're frightened at night to go in the dark. So if they would go in the dark, I would be designated to go with them.

LEVINE: And what would you have to do?

BERNSTEIN: Just stand there and be a watchman, while they performed their normal duties. Then we'd go back in the house and they would play, whatever it was. Then when we were getting ready to go away, when the tickets came, my father was in America. When the tickets came, a man came in with a rattan type of material in which he sewed in all the baggage, our comforters, whatever there was. This was part of the things that were going to go into the hold of the ship and had a designated name on it, who it belonged to. And he would sew it with an awl and a leather thread.

I can just picture him doing it now and then a man came with a horse and wagon and he took us down to where we would get the—we would get the collier, the train. We'd get the train to go—to go to where we would have to go. To Belgium because the ship docked in Antwerp and when we'd get to Antwerp, there would be a man standing on the roof and hollering, "American, Canada, too." People who were going to America or going to Canada, go this way, and he would designate where we had to go.

And there we had a parting and we were examined in Antwerp before we would come here and the unfortunate part of it

is that one of my mother's nephews was coming along with us. His name was Leibish [PH] Oliver—Oliver. Louie Levy, in America, and him, they refused admission and we had to leave him behind and it was a very sad moment because we were all going. But we had to leave him, but he did come on the next ship.

LEVINE: How old a boy was he?

BERNSTEIN: He must have been about—oh, he must have been about twenty-five, twenty-six because he was leaving a wife in Europe. But this incident happened, it was one of the things. And on the ship, when we got on the ship, everybody was sick and we did go steerage.

LEVINE: Well—

BERNSTEIN: That—I'm sorry.

LEVINE: Before we talk about the ship, I'd like to get more memories of Yanow. Was your mother's mother or father also living in that house?

BERNSTEIN: My mother's mother was living, grandma.

LEVINE: And what do you remember about her?

BERNSTEIN: Grandma, I'm so sad that I can't remember her name. She was a darling little lady that begged the boys to be quiet. She couldn't stand it. It was all her boys and she would try to reason with them and it never worked. But she was a place little lady. She didn't give anybody any trouble, and she stayed with us. She stayed with my mother, my older brother, myself and my sister. The four of us stayed up there.

LEVINE: Do you remember how your grandmother treated you?

BERNSTEIN: She was a tender lady. As a matter of fact, from birth she took care of me, as well. All the things that—you don't have the fancy diapers that we had here, but—and the bathing was very unsanitary, as the whole area was. But everybody survived. I guess dirt helps you live a clean life. There it is. My brother went—my brother was older than me and he was the only one of us who went to gymnasia in Poland, in Yanow. He was the only one who went to school. He was the only one.

LEVINE: What was he like? This is your brother Albert?

BERNSTEIN: My brother Al, yeah.

LEVINE: What was he like?

BERNSTEIN: He was—he was a young man that was very, very brilliant. He went to Hebrew in Poland and he went to Hebrew in America and when he came to America, he was upgraded so many times. They didn't have his equivalent until he got to the high school category. That's how well versed he was in Jewish and he spoke a little Polish. He was already further advanced than we were, but he was five or six years older than me.

LEVINE: And how was he? How did he treat you as his younger brother?

BERNSTEIN: He was a brother. Wherever we went, we were brothers. Whatever it happened to be, he defended me. One time he defended me and the guy hit him. That's how my brother was a good brother and when we came here—well, I don't want to get ahead of the story.

LEVINE: Yeah, we'll keep talking about—anything else about Poland? Do you remember any ceremonies?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, I want—excuse me.

LEVINE: Go ahead.

BERNSTEIN: We were walking, my mother and I, and all of a sudden there was a big—there was a big to-do all around and what passed by, an automobile. It was the first summer-hut. It was called a summer-hut. It was the first automobile and the people were chasing it for I don't know how many blocks because they saw an automobile. Then we would go—we would go to the creek to wash the clothing and they would beat it against the rock and wash it and scrub it. Sometimes the Cossacks would come and we'd have to run because they'd be frightened. These are the things that happened when we were in Poland.

LEVINE: Did you ever—what were the Cossacks going to do?

BERNSTEIN: Well, I don't know if they were going to do anything, but the reputation was so frightening that everybody ran. I don't know what they were going to do, but that's how it was because particularly to the Jewish people they were—they were very mean.

LEVINE: Was the town equally divided amongst Jewish, Russian and Polish people, do you know?

BERNSTEIN: I can't say how it was divided. I don't know how it was divided. I know we had neighbors and then while we were in Poland, in Poland there are traveling actors. In Poland there are traveling actors and since the Olivers were such big shots in the town, on a Saturday evening after the prayers, when Saturday evening was over, these actors would perform in my Uncle Schlemer's store, the shoemaker's store. They'd move everything away and they would perform "Joseph and the Twelve Brothers." So they would tell the story about Joseph and the twelve brothers and they had a grave there, an artificial grave and a young man would get down and he would sing. And when I came to America, I would—I had an uncle here, my father's brother-in-law. My father's sister's husband, who liked to hear me portray Joseph and the Twelve Brothers and I would sing the songs that they sang about it and how all the different things. That was very exciting, and he would make me sing it. I'd get down on a corner of a chair and he used to say to me, "[foreign language]" and I would sing what it was, all the Jewish in there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, so you weren't just a listener. You were a singer, too.

BERNSTEIN: Well, I was a listener. I had no voice, but there it was—he liked it. It was in Jewish and it doesn't have to go into this recording.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Now you say the Olivers were—they were well respected in the town.

BERNSTEIN: Yes.

LEVINE: Why was that?

BERNSTEIN: Because—because the areas they cover. First of all, when the Cossacks came into the shoe store for my uncle, he would take care of them. Then all these Olivers had also been in the army, so they had the affiliation with the big shots of the town. That's why they had so much prestige there.

LEVINE: So do you remember any foods? Do you remember any kinds of foods that you had there?

BERNSTEIN: Yes. Yes, that I've never had since.

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LEVINE: What?

BERNSTEIN: There used to be a town crier who came—who came every morning with hot buckwheat cakes. They would come like in a flowerpot design and he would sing out his sales and my mother would buy one. It was very hot and we'd put butter on it and we'd have the hot buckwheat cakes. But the other foods, we had apples. We had potatoes. We had onions. We had all the things. The only thing that I found when I got to America was amazed by a banana. I had never seen a banana. That's some of the stories.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you—how about clothing? Do you remember what kind of clothing you wore?

BERNSTEIN: Clothing, you wore any apparel. There was no critique on the clothing. Whatever you could cover your body, was good enough to cover you. If it was hand-me-downs or whatever, wherever it came, from all these older people, wherever it came from.

LEVINE: And shoes?

BERNSTEIN: Shoes? You wore shoes.

LEVINE: This will sound if you hold it, so—

BERNSTEIN: Oh.

LEVINE: You had a shoemaker in the family.

BERNSTEIN: Yes, we had shoes. We had shoes with heels on them.

LEVINE: He would make them?

BERNSTEIN: He would make them. He would make for some of us. Some we would buy ready made. And then I went to Hebrew. In Europe if you go to Hebrew, a guy called a bellfor [PH], an errand boy comes and rounds up all the children like the pied piker—piper. He picks them up at eight o'clock in the morning and you have your lunch with you. Everybody has their bag of what they're going to eat with them, and he takes them to the rabbi's house and in the rabbi's house, before it's your turn to get up to hear, you sit on a low—on a low ledge and you move over one every time it's your turn. That goes on the whole day until you get up where he points with his indicator what—the letters you should

say and you have to call them out or you get smacked or whatever it is. That was—that was the Hebrew.

And then one time I got very sick in Yanow. I was very sick and it was some kind of a—some kind of a—some kind of a scratch or a psoriasis of some kind and they believe—they believe in these ritual ghostly things. My mother dressed me in the cold of winter and she had a whole bag and she like the—she bewitched me and took off a curse from me and she threw the bag, the beans over my head and made a prayer and something must have happened because I got better, whether it was from that or what. But that was one of the things that happened to me in Europe. That's one of the things I recall.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else about medical care? You know, any kinds of either folk medicine or anything other than—

BERNSTEIN: Yes, folk medicine in our—in our town the guy's name, I don't know his equivalent. Maybe it would be Rueben, it was Haven Feltcher [PH]. Feltcher is a doctor, but it's not a doctor. He applied cups. He applied cups and my mother also applied cups, and when I came to America, the cups were bestowed on me and I applied cups.

LEVINE: Could you describe that in as much detail as you can for somebody who doesn't know what that means?

BERNSTEIN: Somebody who doesn't know cupping—you know what a cup is? You know what they are. This is—the same way that they use leeches for drawing out impurities. These cups are for congestion or for cold and what you do, you take some wood alcohol and you put it in a container or a glass. Then we used to light a candle and I had a piece of wire or a stick with a wick on it of cotton, and I would dip the cotton into the alcohol and then the fire would catch on the wick, and as the fire was burning on the wick, I would put the cup over it and when it got the condensation of the steam, I would apply it to the chest or to the—and it would suck there. It would draw—it would show a red mark where it drew out the blood, and I would put maybe twenty or thirty on the back and then repeat it on the chest. That was called cupping.

LEVINE: And would it actually draw blood out?

BERNSTEIN: It wouldn't draw blood, but you would see that the pores opened up reddish. The pores opened up reddish and the more the congestion, the more reddish would appear on the surface.

- LEVINE: When you think of it now, do you think it was really effective?
- BERNSTEIN: How can we say about these things? They're still using leeches and they seem to be effective and people still use—some use cups, I don't know. Today they have antibiotics and things like that, which probably eliminate and remove the impurities, but in our days we used cups. I had them for the longest time. I don't know what the—where they are now even, but I did it. I did it here for my brother. I did it for other people. Sure.
- LEVINE: And did you see results from it?
- BERNSTEIN: Yeah. Yeah.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh.
- BERNSTEIN: And we applied—we used to apply mustard plasters. I'm sure you're familiar with that, to bring out the impurities. That's what we did. That's what I did.
- LEVINE: Describe the mustard plaster. How you would make them.
- BERNSTEIN: The mustard plaster, you put the mustard into hot water and it forms a paste, and then you put it into a towel or cheesecloth or whatever and it forms a placket about as big as—and you apply it right on the chest and the fumes come right out. You can smell the fumes and it draws out on impurities. They do it on the back and they do it on the front. That's the things we did.
- LEVINE: [Chuckles] What else did you do for—what did you do for enjoyment? When you were in Yanow, what—
- BERNSTEIN: We were little kids. What do little kids know about enjoyment? You play with anything you. You play with—we didn't have toys or anything like that. I didn't—I didn't have a bear or a tiger or an elephant. We had toys, a stick, a piece of tin. Nothing like that.
- LEVINE: How about your mother or the other adults who were around, did they have any kind of—
- BERNSTEIN: Entertainment?
- LEVINE: Yeah.
- BERNSTEIN: Only when these actors came. There was no such thing as going to a theater. There were no moving pictures or theater or

anything like that. And it was a humdrum existence every day, hardworking people. One of my uncles, in his apartment there was an oven. They would bake bread. They would bake cake. It came Passover, they would bake matzos. They would kosher everything and make matzos and during the week they would make all kinds of bread. They would make cakes. The women would do everything, and that's how it went there.

Do you have to look at the time for mother? Is it time to look for mother?

LEVINE: Okay, we're going to pause here. [tape off/on] Okay, we're resuming here. Let's see, we were talking that the entertainment was really when the actors came.

BERNSTEIN: That was the only time. That was the only time. There was no entertainment, nothing like that.

LEVINE: And who were the actors? I mean, were they gypsies?

BERNSTEIN: No, no, they were Jewish people and they went—and this is how they earned a living. They went from town to town and portrayed this and they got money here or they got bread or they got board or whatever it is. That's how it was. That how it was.

LEVINE: Were they held in high esteem, the actors? Do you recall?

BERNSTEIN: Not particularly. It was just this is what they're doing and since they're doing it here, fine. But of course I didn't delve deeply into them. I was too young for that. Just that I absorbed all that and for years I did and did it. I remember, and mother crying and the kids, the boy crying, Joseph crying.

LEVINE: Do you remember any other traveling people, people who came through your town from other towns?

BERNSTEIN: Rabbis. Distinguished rabbis would come through the town and be put up by the Oliver family for the services. If you found out a Rabbi was coming, the whole town wanted to put him up in the schul [PH] or in the—that's all the traveling I remember.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, did you ever leave Yanow when you—before you left to come to America, had you been out of that town?

BERNSTEIN: No. No.

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LEVINE: So that was really—and you said you lived in a garret. So does that mean that the houses had several stories?

BERNSTEIN: Yes. Yes. The top was the garret. There were four—there were four apartments here and a store in the front where Schlemer lived and that's how it was. That was the whole—that was the heritage of the whole Oliver family.

LEVINE: Now, was the Oliver family—did—were you living in say a nicer house than a lot of other people in the town?

BERNSTEIN: I don't know. I never been to it. I was never to anybody's house.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay, so when your father had left before you.

BERNSTEIN: Yes.

LEVINE: By how long had he been in America when you and your mother and brother and sister set out?

BERNSTEIN: Well, he'd been here several times. He'd come and gone several times. But he was away about two and a half years this last time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and what would he do? He would come here and make some money and then would he come back for a period of time?

BERNSTEIN: Yes.

LEVINE: And were you—did you come when you did—how was it that you came at the time you did, you and your mother and brother and sister?

BERNSTEIN: He sent tickets. He sent tickets. That's the way we were—

LEVINE: And so you mentioned—do you remember actually leaving the rest of the Oliver family?

BERNSTEIN: Well, sure.

LEVINE: What was that like?

BERNSTEIN: Well, when we were on the wagon, we kissed all these people goodbye. It was late at night. They were going to drive the horse and wagon all night and we all sat around on the wagon wherever we could, on the baggage, on everything. And I said "Farewell,"

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and they all stood around and watched us go and the last I saw of them in Europe.

END OF SIDE A
BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: Do you—do you remember how you felt about coming to America at that time?

BERNSTEIN: Really, I didn't know what I was doing. I really didn't know. I really didn't know. I didn't know what America meant. I didn't know—whatever they told me to do, I did.

LEVINE: So when you go the train and then you got to Antwerp.

BERNSTEIN: Antwerp.

LEVINE: Did you stay there very long?

BERNSTEIN: I know we got there, we had to board the same day. We had to board the same day.

LEVINE: And as far as the experience that you had aboard ship, is there anything else that—

BERNSTEIN: Well, I know we were sick. I know we were all sick and I haven't got a vivid idea of what transpired. I know it was long and tedious and I guess we were kids. We made the best of it. I know my mother was sick. She laid in the bed. She couldn't get out. Everybody was seasick and I guess we all threw up, whatever. It wasn't a good adventure.

LEVINE: Do you remember steerage?

BERNSTEIN: Yes.

LEVINE: Can you describe it?

BERNSTEIN: Yes. Everything is down there. Everywhere you walk in between mounds of things that are packed up and gone. Whether it's some of the stuff that's been brought aboard or whatever, but everything is around. It's laid out and there's room for you. There's room and there's sleep for you. You go in a cabin.

LEVINE: How about the food, or didn't you eat?

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BERNSTEIN: We didn't eat very much. We didn't know any better to evaluate food. We didn't know enough about that.

LEVINE: Do you remember when the boat came into the New York Harbor?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, I do remember that.

LEVINE: What—

BERNSTEIN: There was a lot of—a lot of hollering from Castle Garden. In my days it was called Castle Accard [PH], Castle Garden. Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Well, actually Castle Garden was where people went in Battery Park before Ellis Island opened. So your father might have come.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: I don't know, but possibly through there.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: But you remember everybody yelling.

BERNSTEIN: Everybody, all families waiting to see their loved ones.

LEVINE: Do you remember Ellis Island at all?

BERNSTEIN: I don't remember anything in Ellis Island. I know we were whisked away in no time at all, once we got off the boat.

LEVINE: By your father?

BERNSTEIN: By my father.

LEVINE: And do you remember the reunion with your father?

BERNSTEIN: The reunion was gratifying. I knew my father a little bit because I was five years old when he left. I knew my father.

LEVINE: And where did he take you?

BERNSTEIN: He took us—the first thing he took us was to Yorkville. That was where we lived first, third floor back.

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LEVINE: Uh-huh, and did you—were there things that struck you as different?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, there were a lot of things different.

LEVINE: Anything you can—

BERNSTEIN: A lot of things different. First place, the boys, the Jewish boys next to me didn't seem like Jewish boys. I didn't understand them and they were way out of my comprehension of what a Jewish boy should be. They looked to me like the goyem [PH] I had left. That's the truth. That's the truth.

LEVINE: When you say next to you, you mean in the apartment?

BERNSTEIN: In the—in the next door apartment and all around, the neighbors. They were different types of people. I know I remember my brother went some place and his next door neighbor held him up and took his pennies away or whatever it was. He was also a Jewish boy, Mikie. He was a greenhorn, got to take advantage of him. But we stayed there. We stayed there in Yorkville. I didn't remember—I don't remember if I went to school in Yorkville because I think we were only there a short time. But—

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about Yorkville in particular?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes. Yeah, I remember Yorkville because when we were only there a little while, the fellows whom I had made acquaintances with, we all went skinny dipping off the pier because we were at the edge. We were three-ten-twelve. The river was like next to it. We went skinny dipping. We were kids, seven, eight years old. We only did that a short while. Then we moved to Brooklyn.

LEVINE: But you remember going to school in Brooklyn?

BERNSTEIN: Yes. I went to school in Brooklyn. First thing I did, I never went to kindergarten. They put me in 1A.

LEVINE: And could you speak English when you got there?

BERNSTEIN: No. Halting. Halting English and my teacher converted me to a right hand writer. I am essentially left-handed. I throw a ball left hand. I do everything left, but I write right-handed. They converted me.

LEVINE: Was that difficult?

BERNSTEIN: No. I didn't know any other way. These were the instructions and that's the way I learned and I learned to write. Then I went through school.

LEVINE: Do you remember any teachers that stand out in your mind or incidents that happened in school?

BERNSTEIN: Yes. I'll tell you. I remember—I remember a teacher in high school, a Mrs. Zimmerman, high school, public school, a Mrs. Zimmerman. She was a darling lady. About, oh, several, quite a few years later, I was pledging for a fraternity and one of the fellows was a nephew of Mrs. Zimmerman and we went some place, wherever it was, and I danced with Mrs. Zimmerman, my public school teacher. That was a thrill. It was exciting. Outside of that, I went to Boy's High, went to high school. I did work. I worked.

LEVINE: Now, were you helping your mother and father in the grocery store?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, I was the main help. I—all right, I don't want to be boisterous, but I helped. I did everything. I did everything.

LEVINE: And what kind of an experience was that for you? Doing, you know, working in the store.

BERNSTEIN: I was helping my parents. That's good enough for me. If I'm helping my parents, they need my help, I'm going to. When we started in our first—in our first little grocery, when we lived in Brooklyn the first place, we had a little grocery. I would go ten or twelve blocks at seven o'clock in the morning for ice for the icebox for the butter and the cheese because we didn't have refrigeration then. We had a regular icebox and I would bring that and I would straighten—I would straighten out the papers. Every Saturday morning we were supposed to be closed, I would wash the counters. I would do all the things in the store. I always did that and then my father would give me a quarter and I would go to the movies.

LEVINE: Do you remember any of the movies that struck you in particular?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, sure. I saw all those movies, going way back. Way back. I used to watch Elmo Lincoln in the serials and Francis X. Bushman in movies. Sure, I saw all those old timers. I used to go

to movies on Saturday and it was far away and I would walk there and come back and the store would be open already for Saturday night. My father would greet me, "Hello, Sport. [unclear] from the movies?" Here we're trying to make a living and you got to go be a big shot in the movies. Those are the things that used to happen. Then we bought one grocery, another grocery. They did well. They did well.

LEVINE: So when you got out of high school then, did you go into the grocery business fulltime?

BERNSTEIN: No. No, no, no. I went to work for other people. I did all kinds of work. All kinds of work. All different things. I didn't go to—we couldn't afford to go to college. That was out of the question, but got along. I did this kind of a job, that kind of a job and then I met a nice young lady. We got married.

LEVINE: What was your wife's name?

BERNSTEIN: Frieda was her name.

LEVINE: Her maiden name?

BERNSTEIN: Her maiden name was Webelowski. [PH] If you read some of that, you know where it comes from.

LEVINE: Now, when did the still come into the picture?

BERNSTEIN: Okay, when Frieda and I were keeping company. Oh, no, we were married already. We were married already and papa used to make—[pause]

LEVINE: Beautiful.

BERNSTEIN: Her father used to make out of prunes make slivervitz. [PH] So we would help. I would help him and he would say—he would say, "Sammy, do you think anybody could smell anything?" and it was so smelly you could smell it for a mile. "What are you talking about, Pop? Nobody could spell it."

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about like who bought it or how it was handled?

BERNSTEIN: No. Papa bought everything. I just came to help him. I just came to help him.

LEVINE: No, but I mean did he sell it then?

BERNSTEIN: He gave it away to people. It wasn't a big deal. He gave it away to people. Before we were married—before we were married, my house, my mother had a guy who did the laundry for her and my uncle Yaina that I told you about was now living on Driggs Avenue in Brooklyn, but he hung out in Stearns Saloon on Rivington Street in New York, and he calls up my mother one Sunday morning. He needs a bottle of liquor. So my mother called her laundry man and he brings a bottle of liquor. Now, how is it going to get from Brooklyn to Rivington Street? I used to play the violin. I took out the violin and I put the bottle of liquor into the violin case and I took the Broadway line, the train, to Delancy Street with my liquor. When I come out on Delancy Street, a guy comes over to me, "Hey, kid, you want to make a nickel?" "Sure." He says, "You want to call my friend Esther on the third floor back?" Says, "Sure," and I'm walking and he says, "Let me hold it for you. It's too much to run upstairs." If I had had the violin, I would have let him hold it, but the liquor, I couldn't let him hold it. I says, "No, no, I'll go myself." "Okay, if you don't want me to hold it, go yourself." I went up third floor, there was no Esther. Well, I came down. I saw already what was happening. Then I went to my uncle on Rivington Street and I brought him the gallon of liquor. That's an experience that I had.

LEVINE: So what—I'm being naïve, but I don't get it. What happened? Why did he send you up there?

BERNSTEIN: Because he wanted to hold the violin. He'd run away with the violin, which he thought was in there.

LEVINE: I see.

BERNSTEIN: That was the idea. That's one of the things that happened to me. It's worth tell you.

LEVINE: Sure.

BERNSTEIN: It was funny.

LEVINE: Okay. So then you—did you settle into one particular kind of work?

BERNSTEIN: Yes. When we were married, I was working for a glassware place. They made goblets, sherbets, dinner plates, all kinds. Salad bowls. Gold encrusted, all that. I was working there, and

when we were married about five weeks, they laid me off. They laid me off, but my wife was working and we had a house. We had a three bedroom—uh, three room apartment in the neighborhood and—yes, we had a three room apartment in the neighborhood and I would stay home and clean up the house and prepare everything and my wife went to work. After a while I got into the coffee business, house to house selling coffee and I was in the coffee route business for about ten years. It all went very nice. We raised two daughters, in the meantime. My parents wanted to buy a bigger grocery and Frieda and I, we had some money. We were going to get engaged, but instead we gave her the money. We gave them the money and they bought the grocery and the grocery turned out very well. Of course, they always gave me back the money.

Then I was in the route business with coffee and tea house to house, but like selling linens and things like that for about ten or twelve years. And we raised two children. My kids went to school. They went to college, whatever they had to do. They got married.

LEVINE: What are your children's names?

BERNSTEIN: My children's names are Arlene and Judy. Arlene—Arlene has three children, two boys and a girl. Judy has three children, two girls and a boy. And they're both wonderful and they're darling children. After I was in the route business a while, I went into the—I was partners with my brother, Hank, making baby formula kits with a sterilizer and bottles and brushes and things like that. I was in that for a couple of years and I sold my route business and I stayed in that. Then I gave that up and I went—I went to work on Church Street in an electronics place making—selling—selling—selling televisions, recorders, things like that for about a while and then I went to work. This was in the Twin Towers Building and this store had to close up because it was part of the Twin Towers Building. So we gave up the business. So I went to work for Century Twenty-One. I don't know if you know them. They're also all kinds of department stores. Not the—

LEVINE: I know what you mean, uh-huh.

BERNSTEIN: They're department stores, Century Twenty-One. Went to work for them. I worked for them for about a year and then my friends called me, would I go to work for them. They were Emerson Radio. Would I go to work for them? And I begged off because this was—for better environment and I went to work for Emerson

Radio and I worked for Emerson Radio about ten or eleven years and then I retired.

LEVINE: Well, when you look back on coming here and starting over again kind of, how do you think about that? How do you think about the fact that you started out in Poland and then your whole family came here?

BERNSTEIN: Well, I think you try to visualize how different things could be if they didn't turn out the way they did. I might have been in one of the concentration camps in Poland. They had the biggest one there. If I had stayed, my whole family might have been wiped out. There wouldn't have been any further existence of this whole family and these generations that followed. It wouldn't have been. So you must say by the grace of God there is a plan that you cannot put your finger on how it is, but there is definitely a plan of how things work out for you. There must be a God given schematic for people to turn out the way they do, good or bad, and personally, I thank God it's turned out good. I think it's turned out good. Even now, now that I'm—I'm a widower. [tape off/on]

LEVINE: Okay, we're resuming here and you were saying—let me ask you. You said that your daughter picked up the form.

BERNSTEIN: Yes, she was in Ellis Island.

LEVINE: At Ellis Island.

BERNSTEIN: Yes.

LEVINE: And did she feel that she had some connection with—

BERNSTEIN: She mailed it to me because she felt that I would have some connection with it, and that's how it came about.

LEVINE: I see. I see. Well, is there anything else you can think of maybe that has come to mind since we've been talking or anything else you'd like to say before we close?

BERNSTEIN: I think—I do want to—I do want to congratulate the whole Parks Department on furthering this pattern because there is a lot there that should be remembered for generations and generations. I think it's a wonderful thing.

LEVINE: I want to thank you very much.

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BERNSTEIN: I'm glad.

LEVINE: This is—I've been speaking with Sam Bernstein, who came here in 1914, when he was seven years old from Poland. He came through Ellis Island and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Today is the—

BERNSTEIN: Twenty-third.

LEVINE: Twenty-third of May, 1996, and I'm signing off. Thank you very much.

BERNSTEIN: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW