EI-753
SMILOW
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RUSSIA, 1920
20

SHIP:
PORT:
RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is May 24th, 1996.

SMILOW: Exactly.

LEVINE: I'm here in Hallandale, Florida and I'm with Aaron Smilow, who came here from Russia in 1920. It was just a few days before he turned twenty years of age.

SMILOW: Exactly.

LEVINE: And—

SMILOW: You are Jewish, so you know it was Yom Kippur day.

LEVINE: Yom Kippur Day.

SMILOW: 1920 Yom Kippur.

LEVINE: Wow, 1920 Yom Kippur.

SMILOW: This is on already.

LEVINE: Yes.

SMILOW: When I came it was Yom Kippur and I had two aunts of mine here in the Bronx. Now, it was—when I was arrived, and this was [unclear], money I didn't have. You were supposed to have some money with you, however, I had nothing. I had twenty-five cents in my pocket, a quarter. There was nothing—in Europe you couldn't—there was nobody had money. It was an inflation. When the revolution broke out, 1917, they printed money. Now, printing money was very easy, but was paper. It was worth nothing. The Army of Occupation changed. At the beginning it was the Russian Army came in because they collapsed the Russian Army. They actually did, between with the rifles and everything. The army was disintegrated, actually. My father was a plumber who had eight children, six girls and two boys.

LEVINE: What was his name, your father?

SMILOW: Isaac. E-sack. In Russian it's E-sack, and Rachel is my—my mother's name is Rachel.

LEVINE: And your name was Smilowski?

SMILOW: Smilowitsky.

LEVINE: Smilowitsky.

SMILOW: You pronounce it Smi-lo-vitsky, just as you talk. It's another thing, you know, in the Russian language there's no such thing as tell me how you spell it because everything is pronounced exactly. If my name is [unclear], that's the way you going to put down. The sound tells you how to put down. It's easy. Much easier.

LEVINE: While we're here, what was your mother's maiden name, do you remember?

SMILOW: Rachel. Ro-ho.

LEVINE: And her maiden name before she married your father?

SMILOW: Pruzina.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

SMILOW: P-R-U-Z—how would be Z? Really, I wouldn't know how to.

LEVINE: Gina? Pru-gina?

SMILOW: Pru-genian.

LEVINE: Pru-genian. Okay.

SMILOW: My father was in the plumbing business. He also made artesian wells. In the city of—Bobroisk [PH] is the city. There were two plumbers, him and his—and his brother. That was—that's all they had is two, two plumbers. So he always had something to do. He employed people. They had a normal life, actually, until about 1914. Then it started very bad. The Russian Army was badly prepared and the war broke out, World War I. They killed the prince from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Europe—Europe they had the Polish nation was divided amongst three people, three countries, Germany, Poland, Russia. It was swallowed up by them. When the war broke out, everything loosened up. The Polish Army became alive and they had—they head of the army, I still remember, was Paderevski. [PH]Who was Paderevski? He lived in the United States for a while and he was a pianist. He was a great pianist. Say about remember, that's what's coming back to me.

LEVINE: Good.

SMILOW: I actually had the childhood, had a good childhood, but when the First World War broke out, nothing was EVER the same.

LEVINE: Could you talk first about your childhood before the war broke out?

SMILOW: When I was a youngster in Russia and everything was normal, I went to Hebrew School and I went to the Hebrew School until I was twelve years of age. You had to know the Torah. You had to learn Hebrew. As a matter of fact, I spoke Hebrew at beginning. Then you forget because you don't use it. When I was thirteen, I went to school to the Russian public school. I was a Jew and they only accepted ten percent Jewish and you couldn't get in unless you bribed somebody. So my father bribed the proper people and I started to go to school. So this is my—it was interrupted, actually, when the war started. The refugees started to come in from the east and there were a lot of tents spread out for the people, and my father had to supply them with water because he was in the plumbing business.

The war was going very bad for Russia and there was a lot of turmoil. We had different parties, Socialist party. Naturally, it was not open. It was under the core, sort of, and things started to rumble. People were restless. The war didn't go so good and before you know it, the Revolution of 1917 broke out and a lot of fighting was going on in the streets. A lot of people died.

LEVINE: What did you personally witness during that time of turmoil?

SMILOW: In the turmoil I witnessed it in the streets. People who were killings. Quite a bit of killings amongst the Socialists and the Bolsheviks, they were called again. The communists were called Bolsheviks. There was a Trotsky and Stalin ahead of it. They live in German and when the revolution broke out, at first it was a [unclear]. This in history. Was the head of the Duma. [PH]In Russia it's called the Congress, Duma. But there was a counter revolution and Karanski [PH] saved himself and came to the United States. That's all history. And the head of them was Trotsky and Stalin they were the main thing. A lot of people which I didn't remember already. I know the one that made peace that time with Germany because they collapsed when the United States went into war that time against Germany.

And hunger, there was hunger because the peasant in the army consisted, most of them were peasants. Ninety-eight percent in Russia were peasants. There was no middle class.

LEVINE: Was your family middle class?

SMILOW: Middle class.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SMILOW: But it was when the revolution broked out, they chased them out from his property, the revolutionaries. I saw that that's no place for me there. We were actually occupied by the Polish Army and that's how come I'm in the United States. Because in the west, you couldn't travel nowheres. Once the revolution broke out, that's it, you stay there.

LEVINE: As a Jewish family, how were you treated in general, all of the time? Before the World War One and—

SMILOW: Well, we were—we were not—we were not abused in any way, except the Polish Army was very strict. The Germany Army gave us bread and a lot of cookies and whatnot, butter. They had everything, but they didn't stay too long and then the Polish Army came in.

LEVINE: And how were they strict, the Polish Army?

SMILOW: The Polish Army, they treated us not bad. They—if they needed something, they requisitioned it. They didn't ask you no questions, it's a wartime. They told you something, you have to do it. It have to be done. My father was a little abused by the Polish Army.

LEVINE: How so, do you remember?

SMILOW: Well, he didn't want to go to a certain place to do some work down there and they took him actually by the—by the throat sort of, said, "You come, or else." As a matter of fact, the soldier that pushed him around, I grabbed his thing from his hand and I threw it away. He had a—he was armed and I got him—I had to run like hell to save myself, and I ran away. I wanted to come to the United States. I didn't have no trade because of the times were not normal. I did go to school; I didn't go to school. It was just—it was bad. Hunger was rampant because no food. The peasants wouldn't sell you anything, except if you had gold or if you wanted to give them a certain chair or something of value. They had some. Due to the war, the peasants were the—they were in the army and everything was disorganized. So there was hunger down there.

I had to travel quite a few times and after the revolution, I ha to go to Kiev to get some flour. I went to Moscow speculating. I bought some pepper. There was no pepper, a little item like that. You couldn't get it for no money.

LEVINE: Now, did your father put up the money for you to go and get the pepper?

SMILOW: My father did have a little, few gold pieces. That was—that was—that's the only thing they accepted. If you exchanged a five dollar gold, that was a lot of money. Ten dollars. He had a few of those. As a matter of fact, before I left, my father gave me three five gold pieces and that's it. Wasn't a lot, but it was enough for me to buy food and all that.

Now, we actually left five of us in a covered wagon. We were two cousins and three other people. There were five of us. My mother gave me the okay, but not my father. He said, "Why are you running away? The whole family is here. You're a little fellow. You're not such a powerful man. You're going to the United States of America and down there is laborer and you have no trade. Where you going? Whatever's going to happen to us? Stay with us." But I was adamant. I just wanted to go. I know there was no place for me.

LEVINE: What did your mother say to you?

SMILOW: Well, she says, “My son, this is your wish and I think if you that’s your desire, go.” My father said, “No,” but I said, “Yes.” When I left, my father just—my mother had a baby of eight months old at the time, my youngest sister. It was a different in the age of twenty years. She died last year. I succeeded in getting for her visas for her and her son, but she died. So that’s it. That was all.

The way we got to the United States, we had to go to Warsaw.

LEVINE: I’m sorry to interrupt you. You said that you had two cousins who were with you.

SMILOW: Two cousins.

LEVINE: And who else?

SMILOW: And people from the neighborhood. It’s not important.

LEVINE: Okay.

SMILOW: Well, you don’t want to know the names and that?

LEVINE: No, no.

SMILOW: That’s irrelevant. As a matter of fact, from the five, two went to Israel and the three of us came to the United States. Now, it was the main what I said in Ellis Island, we had a tough time traveling because the railroad was taken out by soldiers. You were not allowed. It was wartime. They bound to grab you and say you’re a spy or something. I don’t even—now, we had to have passports to travel. We had a mayor. That time it was not the United Nations yet. Before the United Nations was another. I forgot. Just don’t remember the name of it. An international. He gave me—he gave me a passport and the other four, we had passports. That’s the passport that you saw here. We—in our place we had soldiers stationed in our house. We had a big house, so they slept in our house. One of them was cavalry. He was on a horse. I spoke to him. He was a lieutenant and I said, “What chances are?” and he says, “Well, it’s going to be rough because, you know, soldiers keep on moving all around here. But,” he says, “What I’m going to do for you, I’ll take you on the outskirts of the city with the covered wagon.” But he was not—he was a thief himself. When he got outside of the city, two people, two soldiers from both sides, they grabbed the horse. They said, “This is a hold up. What can you do for us? Let’s have it.” Well, we paid them a certain amount in Polish money and they let us go.

The covered wagon refused to take us much further. He says, “Look what’s going on. It isn’t safe to travel.” He took us on as far as a village and he let us in the village. In the village we had to get a peasant and he helped us to get further, to travel towards Warsaw.

LEVINE: Another wagon?

SMILOW: Different wagon, yeah. As we were going through the woods, the Polish Army—there was a lot of soldiers coming back and forth. We were not treated right by the soldiers. They kept on pushing off the wagon and whatnot. We succeeded in coming to a big city which I just—that’s what I forgot, really. Over there we got acquainted with some soldiers and we told them our condition. So they said, “Well, don’t worry. We’ll go with you, providing you go into Warsaw. Do you have any relations there?” So we told them we have no relations, but we’re going to send telegrams and I’m sure they’re going to send us money. So we promised them money, the soldiers, when we get to Warsaw.

LEVINE: These were Polish soldiers who wanted to go to Warsaw.

SMILOW: Polish soldiers. This is wartime. The armies were going back and forth, you know. So whatever it was. We came to I think it was Lublin a big city and the soldiers said, “Look, the trains are running from here. It’s enough with the horses.” They kept on requisitioning peasants, you know. They didn’t want to go, but they went, period. And we gunna make believe that you’re our prisoners to take you into the train, and we’ll come to Warsaw. That’s where we’re going for our vacation.” And that’s how we got to Warsaw. We finished our traveling by train. We registered at a hotel and the soldiers knew where we were and they said they’ll be around tomorrow or whatever it is, “And we hope you keep your promise,” they told us. Soon as they left, we changed hotels. We figure that we are in trouble here. We changed hotels, but we forgot one thing. That this the chauffeurs, they knew each other. They told them where we went. So unfortunately one of the boys was beat up from our group, but we ran away. We saved ourselves.

Money we didn’t have. We did send telegram to the United States, but while we were in Warsaw, we had to get our visas and that’s where the ambassador was there. As it happened, I didn’t have any papers. There was really no papers to go, except one of my cousins had papers from the United States. As it happened, the IS was there, God bless them and there was a few days later there was rumors that the Bolsheviks are very successful and they may come even to Warsaw and it was dangerous for us. We were not the

only people that were going to the United States. There were a lot of widows. There was a lot of women that had their husbands in the United States and during the war they couldn't travel to the United States, and they had children with them. So the IS decided that's no place for us and they going to take us to Danzig for the international city. Danzig. It was German, but they settled it between Poland and Germany, and that was international.

Now we had to wait to get a boat, and some kind of a line. We were green as grass. We didn't know how to go about it and the Susquehanna was standing in that—I was there with the two cousins. One was a girl and she said to me, "Aaron, you go. It's best for the men to get the hell out of here." So I went to the Susquehanna. It was a small boat of about sixteen thousand ton. It was a cattle boat. It was not for passenger, but that time you take anything to get to the United States. Everything but walk. [Chuckles] So I got in. Bunks, there was—the boat had only bunks. It didn't have no beds or anything. I was an active young man, so the first thing I said, "Do you have a kitchen in here?" "Yes." "Can I wash dishes?" and they accepted me, open hands, sort of. Why not, something for nothing.

The last—it was I think around the end of August and that's when we arrived to the United States. It took us two weeks. A lot of sickness. Everybody was sick and the toilets were all stuffed up. Washed. Stinky as hell. People were vomiting and carrying on. I was getting—when we saw the Statute of Liberty, we were certainly happy. I came to Ellis Island. Ellis Island we were given sandwiches. Cheese sandwiches. I thought it was the best in the world. That's coming from hunger-land. I was in that—the first thing, of course, is doctor examines you and see if anybody had any sickness. No problem with that. The only thing is I didn't have no money and the inspector said to me, "How much money do you have?" and I says, "I have a dollar." So he started to laugh. He said, "Let's see your dollar." I got red like a beet. I had a quarter. [Laughs] But then he looked at me and he said, "Let's see your addresses where you're going." "I'm going to the Bronx, 170 East Street in the Bronx."

LEVINE: Could he speak—

SMILOW: He pushed me on the shore and he says, "Carfare is only a nickel and you got twenty-five cents. You'll get there. Go," and he let me off. As a matter of fact, I called my relations and this Yom Kippur and they were on the way, but I didn't have no time for that. I wanted to—I wanted to get out of there. Sure enough, I walked out on Ellis Island. I looked at the buildings and the air was there and the elevators. That time they had a lot of elevators when I arrived. Sure enough, a couple of boys are walking around. They were off that day

and they saw that I got off the boat. Said, "Where you going?" I said, "I'm going to the Bronx. Will you help me? Just tell me how to be there?" He says, "Well, you just go out the express for a nickel and it will go to a 149th." So the two of them had a conference, the two boys and they decided to have a mitzvah. Let's take him there. I was lucky and they took me right to my aunt's house, but there was nobody home. It was Yom Kippur. The neighbors, everybody was anxious to see somebody arriving from Europe because there was very few people came that time. And everybody wants to know how's the revolution and what's doing in the Soviet Union and all that stuff.

My relations were glad to see me. I didn't know any of them because I was seven years old, I think or six years old when they left for the United States. When my aunt came from schul [PH], all the relations came around. I didn't know them. Cousins and whatnot and they said, "Well, you'll be all right here." Thank God that you arrived safely. That's the main thing."

The question was what do you do? I didn't have no trade. I had two aunts. One was an elderly lady and the other was younger, much younger, and she said, "We have some distant relation of ours. I think he's in delicatessen business. Let me call them up and I'll find out maybe they can find something for you to do." And the other one said, "Maybe you'll be a foyer." Maybe they didn't know exactly themselves. And I said—one of my cousins was a plumber. He learned the trade in my father's shop. So I said, "Maybe do you think it would proper for me to become a plumber?" He says, "That's too much for you. It's too hard of work. You go to the delicatessen and it will be much better."

This man was Morris Reuben. When we came there it was 105 Amsterdam Avenue, Manhattan.

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BEGIN SIDE

SMILOW: "Actually, I cannot afford to have a clerk here because I'm working here with my wife. Whether there's enough for you to do, you can learn the trade, but you'll have to start from the kitchen. You'll peel potatoes. Mayonnaise was not like today. You had to by hand. He says, "You'll be able to make mayonnaise. You'll make me salads. I think you'll learn the trade here. You wouldn't have no problem. Of course, you can't speak the language but you'll be here and I'll give you a place to sleep in the hallway. I have no room for you, but the hallway's big enough to put a bed in there." So I slept in the hallway, that dark hallway, but to me it was like paradise, because I came from Hunger-land. People couldn't understand that. There was no bread. There was no butter. There was very little to eat.

I worked and this is what happened. I learned the trade. I made salads. I became the salad man. Peeled potatoes. Cut cabbage. Make salads and all that. The last day there and I got exactly—he paid me eight dollars a week. Before I came there, my family, one bought me a pair of shoes. The other one bought me a suit. And the other one bought me a coat because I had nothing. I had to have something to put on, to wear. I was there for eight months and I learned a little of the language already. I started to speak. He encouraged me, this boss, Mr. Reuben. After eight months, I was not a greenhorn no more. I said, "Look, eight dollars is fine, but that's not enough." "Well, I cannot pay you much," he says. "I guess you'll have to find something else."

I picked up the paper there and I found a job on Broadway in Brooklyn and they wanted to know how much experience I had. I says, "Well, I'm pretty good." But after a few days, he saw that I am not—"How much money do you want?" I says, "Forty dollars a week," because you got to ask forty so maybe you'll get thirty or something. [Chuckles]

LEVINE: This is a delicatessen?

SMILOW: Delicatessen. So he gave me thirty-five dollars. After the week was over, he told me "You're not enough experience. I need somebody with more experience. You're a nice man. I'd love to keep you, but I need somebody with more experience." In the meanwhile, Morris Reuben had a brother that had a store on 6th Avenue. So they called me up and they says, "I think I could use you," and he gave me twenty-five dollars a week. I made mayonnaise. I made salad. I was able to stay behind a counter all ready. I had a wife and two children. They were working on it and the kids were always crying and their noses was running and they were standing on the small feet. I'm standing on their feet, and I said, "Is this America? Some day if I'm in the business, my wife will never be in this business."

I stayed there for about three months. I get a call again from my first boss. "I'm in trouble. I bought another store and they steal from me. Aaron, please see if you can come here. We'll get along as far as the money's concerned." And that's how I became a businessman. He had another store and he couldn't run it, so I bought it from him. I had saved up three hundred dollars by that time and there was a big room in the back of the door and we slept in the back of the store. Made salads, myself and another fellow by the name of Schifferen [PH], Joe Schifferen.

We were drawing about sixty dollars a week already. That was big money in those days, 1921.

LEVINE: You mean you were taking that much in, or you were actually taking that much pay?

SMILOW: Oh, we had—we had merchandise. We had chicken. We sold pig's feet. We sold ham. Pork, all kinds of groceries. It was a mixture, delicatessen and groceries.

LEVINE: I see. Now, was this on 6th Avenue?

SMILOW: Amsterdam Avenue and 62nd Street. I don't think it's in existence. They must have knocked it down. I haven't been there in so long. They put up big, big buildings down there. It was an old section. It was old and dilapidated. I had a good little store because the people were getting paid on Saturday and I had to have [unclear]. The men used to come and the first thing they went is for a drink. And I stayed there for about four years. I saved up some money and a certain gentleman came around and says, "You sell me the store. If you don't sell me the store, I'm going to open up a store across the street," and being that we were youngsters, we were still young, so we decided to sell the store. We sold the store for about seventy-five hundred dollars. So I was in the money already.

From there we made attempts to buy another place, but they wanted big money. Finally, we bought a store on 2nd Avenue and 22nd Street, Manhattan. It was a restaurant—just a restaurant. We bought the restaurant. Not far from the restaurant was a little factory they were making caps for bottles, bottle caps, and that was a big supply. The people that worked down there and the people around there. We did a nice business there. We had waitresses and we were doing pretty good. We stayed there one year and the factory moved out. The factory moved out and the business moved with it.

LEVINE: Did you have the same partner?

SMILOW: The same partner, exactly.

LEVINE: How did you happen to team up with that partner?

SMILOW: The partner was a clerk. There was a lot of clerks walking around. There was plenty of help. Delicatessen's an industry. They had a union, too. It was an industry. As it happened, you people didn't belong to the union.

One of the fellows that was traveling with me, sort of covered wagon that I call, which it was a covered wagon, also became a delicatessen man. He was a clerk and he worked in different stores by the time already. Time was going on. It's already 1926, and he brought over his parents. So I stayed with them already, this friend.

They didn't have no place and he said to me, "You been in the business that's the gentile line, ham, pork and all that. Why don't you go into the kosher line?" Then we bought a store 170th Street and Jerome Avenue, between Jerome and the Concord. We bought a store and we were doing a nice business. My partner decided it's time to get married, and he was keeping company. It was a good store. We were drawing about a hundred and twenty-five dollars a week a piece. Now, that's a lot of money in those days.

His lady friend had a friend and they came both came in to inspect us, the girls. They want to see what kind of people we are and all that. It was one short little girl, my size. The other was a little taller. My partner was a little taller man and before you know, he married this Ida and her friend was Debbie and we started to keep company. We kept company for six months. My partner decided to get married, so I said to his parents, "I'll just go to the court and go get married." I says, "I haven't got a big family here." My partner had a family—did have the family. So he says, "I'm getting married and they're going to have a big wedding. Why don't you make it a double wedding?" And that's exactly what happened. Was a double wedding and both of us got married. That's the marriage that lasted for sixty-eight years with my wife.

LEVINE: Your wife's name was Deborah.

SMILOW: Deborah, Debbie.

LEVINE: Debbie, and what was her maiden name?

SMILOW: Friedman. Is that your name?

LEVINE: No. Levine is mine.

SMILOW: Oh, Levine.

LEVINE: Yes, sort of the same thing. [Laughs]

SMILOW: [Laughs] Well, I stayed in that store for a few years, but we had some disagreement and I said, "That's it," and we parted. I bought a store—so it's not important really. I must have had about five stores.

LEVINE: You mean one after the other?

SMILOW: The retail business. Well, I'm making it short, but it took time, you know. Before you know, the Depression came around in 1929.

LEVINE: And how did that effect you?

SMILOW: I had a store at that time and I had to close it up. That was bad. I went broke down there. But I did buy some stock in the Bank of United States. It was—they all closed up, including the Bank of United States. It was a very bad time. The Depression hit—I'm sure you read about in the papers everybody—that's part of history and we all thank God that it was Roosevelt came along at that time and he pulled us out of it.

From there I went to the Bronx. To Brooklyn, I beg your pardon. King's Highway and Ocean Avenue. It was a good store down there and I picked up two different partners. We bought the store. The store was successful store, and I spent there almost thirty years with my wife and I retired from that store and that's the time that I—Florida is warm and I bought this apartment here in 1972. It wasn't built. It was nothing here. It was a field and as you see, that's where I am right now.

LEVINE: Did you have children?

SMILOW: We had three children. One girl, one daughter, Eileen. One Julias and Morton. Three of them. Mortie became an attorney and for a little while he worked outside, but he decided to go with the city, there was openings. He took an exam and he passed, was accepted in Finance Department. As a matter of fact, my son now is sixty-seven years old. [Laughs] And he worked hard. I have one in the printing of material. He has an office on 38th Street and Broadway. He's still there and the children are with him so he can't retire. Otherwise, he would retire. My daughter married a young man, they were in the underwear business. His father took him in as a partner. In 1961 he married my daughter and that's the time I said, "I had enough." The children were out, except the old one, which was never got married. He was still with us. I figured we'll find a place for him.

Well, this is very short what I'm telling you.

LEVINE: I know.

SMILOW: A lot of things happens. 1929 was an awful time. People were selling apples in the streets, committing suicide. That's also part of history. What I'm going to tell you, it's known.

LEVINE: Yeah. So what happened with you in particular, you had a delicatessen and 1929, is that when you—

SMILOW: In 1929 I didn't tell you everything because I went in another store from 170th Street. I sold it to my partner. Something happened between us and I decided to get out of there. So I left him there. I

went to University Avenue with another partner. I kept on knocking around sort of. I opened up a grocery and deli. From there I went to another place, just can't remember exactly where, and we were not successful there. It was during the Depression. It was not so good. Times were bad and before you know it, I closed that one, too, and I went back in the street, 180th Street in Manhattan and I opened up a store and that was a success.

LEVINE: Was that in the '30s?

SMILOW: In the '32. I opened the store with a partner and we were successful in there. I wanted to remain in the store, but this partner says, "We came together and we walk together." I said, "What do you care? I'll get somebody else and pay you out," and he said, "No." He was a stubborn man and a rich man. I was broke that time and I wanted to stay and save up a little money, but he wouldn't permit me. So we sold that store. From there we came to King's Highway. That's when we bought the store on King's Highway and that was called Gitlet's. [PH] It was an established store. We did a very fine business and we stayed around for about twenty-eight, twenty-nine years and I retired from there.

LEVINE: I see. So you were really in the delicatessen business even in the Depression.

SMILOW: Even in Depression. I have nothing else. That was my trade. I had to stick to it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SMILOW: I wanted to get a job, but you couldn't get a job for no money in the world. I was work for thirty dollars a week. They tell me you couldn't get them. I was forced into business again. When I found a place on [unclear], [unclear] and Broadway was an empty store. So the first thing is I look for a man with money, and I had to borrow. It was a very international attorney, Mr. Shapiro. We became good friends because that was his uncle. Reuben was his uncle. He used to come into the store, so we got acquainted and he helped me out with cash and I went into that store in King's Highway. On King's Highway, Mr. Gitlet, his brother was a broker and he had an office on 42nd and Broadway, and that's where he recommended his brother's store. His brother went to retire, so we bought it and we stayed there. Of course, I'm just making it short.

LEVINE: Shore.

SMILOW: Different things happened and we moved and there was a lot of things. At the end we were doing so much business that—during the war we suffered. Everybody did. There's no question about it, while we were in the store. We didn't do enough business, but we just barely got along. When the war was over, we moved our store from one place to the other, a little larger quarters and I had a hundred seats already. Good store. We had lines, actually. Saturday, Sunday, there was lines. We worked very hard until two o'clock in the morning, three o'clock in the morning and I was tired out and the time came and when my daughter got married, that was the main thing is to get her married and that's it. So I mean she got married, I decided I have enough and I had a few dollars saved up and I said, "That's for my retirement." Of course, I'm telling you—I'm leaving out a lot of things.

LEVINE: I know you are.

SMILOW: There was a lot to talk about, but—

LEVINE: Well, tell me this, when you look back on your life, coming here when you were just about twenty years old and starting fresh, starting a whole new life really, how do you think about that? How do you think about that?

SMILOW: The United States, as I see it now, this is the greatest country in the world. Since then I was three times back to the Soviet Union to see my family. The reason I didn't get married sooner was because I had hoped to get my parents over here. So I just kept away from marriage, but my father said, "These bum's here." He called them bums, the revolutionaries, the communists. My father was a rich man. He had a lot of property. As a matter of fact, he had a—besides being a plumber, he had a Turkish bath. People didn't have no—there was—they didn't have showers or water in their houses. Once a week they went to the Turkish bath and he had one of those.

LEVINE: Do you remember that Turkish bath?

SMILOW: Of course.

LEVINE: Could you describe it?

SMILOW: It was a big piece of property. We had about twenty-five or thirty rooms separately and it was a general place for everybody. For women separate and men separate. Water was being pumped for the place where the horses. Certain—the horse was walking around and it was pumping the water and we had tanks, big tanks and it was

heated. The water, for hot water you had wood. Used to buy a lot of wood, chopped wood and we used to buy wood and chop it ourselves. We had men. We had people working for us. We were pretty well off. My father was pretty well off.

LEVINE: So you would have separate little stalls in each room?

SMILOW: You could go in—yes, there was little rooms. You had your own heat and your own water and there was a lot of stones. The stones were made hot and you poured water on the stones and you had steam. That's the Russian way, taking a bath. It was primitive, if you would see it today, but it was very convenient.

LEVINE: Do you remember, what was your father like? When you think about your father, when you were a little boy, what was—

SMILOW: My father served four years for Nikolai, Nikolai II. He was in the army. He was—he had a pair of good hands. He was talented. You see the frames here, he used to make them up, beautiful frames. For a hobby he made frames and he was pretty successful. We had everything in the house, but the revolution and everything was broken up to nothing. They threw him in jail for one year. They want money because there was a rumor that Mr. Smilowsky has lots of gold. So they didn't give them the money, so they threw him in jail for a year. After you served a year, you served your time, you are free. I wanted to send money to my mom, and she sent me a letter. "We have everything." They were starving, but she says, "We got everything. Don't. Everything is all right." Why? Because soon as the money came in, if you send it, they took the money. The government, they took the money away. The communists, you see. So they kept him for a year in prison, then let him go.

My father never wanted to come here. He says, "What am I going to do there? Become a plumber at my age, again?" He says, "These [unclear will not stay long. They're going to go. They can not run a country. They people, they don't know how to run a country."

LEVINE: So your mother—

SMILOW: My father's prediction came true, but it came true seventy years later, it fell apart.

LEVINE: And your mother didn't want to come because your father didn't want to?

SMILOW: Well, it's one unit.

LEVINE: So she led you to think it was all—

SMILOW: I had one brother. The others all married. A couple of them, they lost in the big war, they lost their husbands and they suffered an awful lot. One sister—couple of sisters were all right, and the one that was eight months old when I left, she became a communist and she finished engineering. My older—my younger brother also was an engineer. When I came to visit him in Leningrad, not the first time. The first time he was alive. The second time he died and my nephew was so proud of him. He was the chief electrical engineer of the city of Leningrad. He says, "I want to show you. Come with me to my house," but we had to walk up four flights of steps. I didn't want to go. My wife wouldn't let me. [Laughs] My sister said, "No, you don't have to see." He had documents that he wanted to show me. He said, "You'd have great pleasure in seeing what your brother accomplished." Well, they lived in fear.

This is not the way I'm telling you. When I came the first time, my brother refused to walk with me in the street because he signed up that he has no relations of any kind, except in the Soviet Union. In other words, he has nobody in America or England, because they were afraid for spying. Everybody was a spy.

LEVINE: And how did they think about you? How did your family who stayed in Russia, how did they think about you having come to the United States?

SMILOW: Well, they were happy for me because it's here, you had a car and you had a home. I had a house. I bought my own home. So I lived very nicely here in the United States. As they called it in Yiddish, the Golden Medina, the Golden Land. Now, I didn't see any gold in the streets, however. You had to work for it. My father used to say, "You know, there's no question about getting money. There's a little key that you find. The key is sweat and blood," he says. "You work for a thing, you get it. Nothing for nothing." When I came here, how well I know it, but I think this is the greatest country in the world.

LEVINE: What makes you feel particularly proud or what makes you feel very satisfied that you've done?

SMILOW: Well, I raised up three lovely children and they are very successful, thank God. As I said, one was a lawyer and retired from the city of New York. The other one is still in business. My daughter is married to also a businessman and doing very well.

LEVINE: Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to say before we finish here?

SMILOW: All I can say is when I saw the Statue of Liberty, that was the greatest thing. [Voice breaks up] Well, I'm telling you this story. Of course, there's a lot more, but I'm getting too old for it. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Well, I want to thank you very much. It was really a pleasure talking to you.

SMILOW: You're very welcome. This my story and this is my life, sort of, and I'm sure all the rest millions of people are here the same way. This country here, if you work, you can always find something to do. I would wash dishes. I'd do anything to make a living, but it's here. The opportunity is here. There is no other country in the world that can duplicate the United States and you can see it. They give billions of dollars away to that tiny little country that was created after the Second World War because they killed out all the Jewish and there were barely left. Poland had three million Jews. They got maybe twenty-five thousand Jews or twenty thousand.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I'm going to close here. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I've been speaking with Mr. Aaron Smilow who came from Russia in 1920, when he was just about twenty years of age, and today he's ninety-six. No, ninety-five.

SMILOW: Ninety-five.

LEVINE: He's only ninety-five and he looks wonderful.

SMILOW: Thank you.

LEVINE: And it's been a real pleasure. Thank you very much.

SMILOW: It was my pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Levine. I appreciate your coming over here. Thank you very much, and as I said, I've written somewheres my—

END OF INTERVIEW