

EI-765

MAX JUSSEM

BIRTHDATE: JUNE 10, 1908

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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- **POLAND**
- **THE US: NEW YORK CITY**

LEVINE: Today is July 12th, 1996, and I'm here with Max Jussem, who came from Poland when he was sixteen years of age, in 1924. At that time, his name was--

JUSSEM: Motel, M-O-T-E-L.

LEVINE: M-O-T-E-L, Yosem.

JUSSEM: Yosem.

LEVINE: Y-O-S-E-M.

JUSSEM: S-E-M, Yosem.

LEVINE: Okay, and today Mr. Jussem is ninety-four years of age.

JUSSEM: More!

LEVINE: More!

JUSSEM: 1908!

LEVINE: 1908, so it's 1996.

JUSSEM: Yeah, it's two years missing. Two years above six, eight, ninety-eight. [Unclear] years.

LEVINE: Yeah, well you certainly look like you're healthy.

JUSSEM: No, I'm not healthy. I went through just two and a half years ago, five bypasses.

LEVINE: Really? Wow. Okay, well I'm going to start. You have a really unique and interesting story. It's a story of an experience that I suspect a great many people had.

JUSSEM: Yeah.

LEVINE: However, in all of the people I've interviewed, I've never yet encountered one who talked about it, and that is, coming illegally into the country going to Canada, and then from Canada coming back.

JUSSEM: Yeah, smuggled in.

LEVINE: Smuggled into the United States. So this is going to be absolutely fascinating.

JUSSEM: And then I got legalized by marrying an American woman.

LEVINE: Oh, you got legalized. Okay, well let's start at the very beginning. If you would say your birth date for the tape, and where in Poland you were born.

JUSSEM: [Unclear], Poland, [Polish]. Of course, now it's a different—seems then already that [unclear] was already a part of Russia, a part of Germany, a part of Lithuania. Kept on changing; kept on changing. And now I don't know. Now I think it's a part of Poland.

LEVINE: Okay, and tell your birth date for the tape.

JUSSEM: 1908, 1908. June the tenth, 1908.

LEVINE: And June the tenth was a birthday that you—

JUSSEM: Yeah, made up.

LEVINE: --Made up because you really didn't have a birth certificate.

JUSSEM: No birth certificate, no. Nobody in my shtetl had a birth certificate.

LEVINE: Did your mother ever tell you anything about the day you were born, about your birth? About anything connected with it?

JUSSEM: [Unclear], June the tenth. That's the second day of [Yiddish]. [Yiddish] is a Yiddish holiday. She told me at that time it was [Yiddish]. Second day of [Yiddish] was June the tenth, and so it was decided June the tenth.

LEVINE: So what was your mother's name?

JUSSEM: Pesha.

LEVINE: Pesha. And her maiden name?

JUSSEM: Maiden name: Ukavitzky. Ukavitzky.

LEVINE: Could you spell it? O--?

JUSSEM: U-K-A, Uka, V-I-T-Z-K-Y.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

JUSSEM: Michael. M-I-C-H-A-E-L, Michael. My father's name was Yosem.

LEVINE: And now was your father in Poland at the same time, or did he come earlier to the United States than you did?

JUSSEM: No, no, no. My father died in Poland, died about three or four years before I came to America. I think I must have been then about—

LEVINE: Thirteen.

JUSSEM: --Thirteen years old.

LEVINE: So in other words, your father never came to America?

JUSSEM: No, no, my father and my mother never. My father died a natural death, but my mother went to the gas chambers. Mother and two sisters, and many children, many. Because there they were having children.

LEVINE: What do you remember about your father, up until the time he died?

JUSSEM: Very, very little. Struggled to make a living. To make a living in Europe was a very tough job!

LEVINE: What did he do to make a living?

JUSSEM: Buying all kind of grains from the peasants. The peasants used to come into the shtetl, bring him their—they were the ones that had the [unclear]. They were growing corn, wheat—corn, wheat, and all the other stuff.

LEVINE: So they would bring those--?

JUSSEM: In, and we would buy it from them. And then there were wholesalers that were taking away from us!

LEVINE: I see. So your father bought from the farmers. Your father sold to the wholesalers?

JUSSEM: It was one buying from the other, one buying from the other, trying to make some kind of a living. Making a living was a very big problem! The minute America opened up, especially in the nineties of the last century, toward the big pogrom of '87, then the immigration was very big then.

LEVINE: Did you know people who had come to America before you actually came here?

JUSSEM: My mother had four sisters; she was one of five girls. And the four sisters, the two older ones and the two younger ones came to America with their father. With their father, and then he didn't want to stay. He said, "America isn't kosher," and he left for Israel. But the four girls remained here.

LEVINE: What did you think? What did you know about America? What had been told to you before you came?

JUSSEM: That in America, Americans want to be—solid gold. You don't know Yiddish at all?

LEVINE: Not much.

JUSSEM: Not much. That there is gold in the streets. I mean, something like it.

LEVINE: So how would they say that in Yiddish?

JUSSEM: [Yiddish]. At gates of the garrison, you picked up gold. I never picked up any gold in the garrison.

LEVINE: So in other words, did you know your grandparents at all, either set of grandparents?

JUSSEM: On father's side. On father's side I knew them.

LEVINE: What were your memories of them? What are your memories of them?

JUSSEM: Oh, everybody was buying and selling. The shtetl was buying and selling. They didn't produce anything of their own, but they were buying. One sold to the other one. And somehow they managed to live, somehow. It was this kind of a living.

LEVINE: Could you describe or say anything you can remember about the shtetl?

JUSSEM: No, no, not much. The shtetl, they read translations of Yiddish writers, [Unclear], Eisenberg. I mean, there are many of these writers. Most likely, you've been reading Bashevis Singer, because he was popular here.

LEVINE: Yeah.

JUSSEM: From him you also got an idea about the shtetl, about the home.

LEVINE: Do you remember the difference inside the shtetl, as it compared with when you went out of it?

JUSSEM: Oh, there was a very big difference. In America, in America, when we came to America, there was Yiddish papers. Shtetl didn't have anything. It was the Press, [unclear], many papers, [unclear]. New York had about six, seven papers, daily papers, at that time. Now there isn't even one. There is one weekly, Forward, once a week.

LEVINE: Do you remember any experiences with your grandparents in Poland?

JUSSEM: No, no.

LEVINE: No. Do you remember what kind of people they were like?

JUSSEM: One of the grandparents, one of them I told you came to America with his four girls, four brothers. My mother remained there because there was, one of the mothers was sick, a sick woman. Since my mother was the middle one, then the older ones came to America together with their father, and the younger ones he brought to America. He had a brother here; he brought them to the brother. And that's all there is to it. And then he left for Israel.

LEVINE: He stayed in Israel, did he?

JUSSEM: Yeah, he died in Israel. He died in Israel, but many years ago. This must have been at the end of the century yet, or the beginning of the Twentieth Century.

LEVINE: So, did you go to school in Poland?

JUSSEM: [Polish]

LEVINE: [Polish]. And was that a tutor coming to you?

JUSSEM: No, no, you go to [Polish]. Many, many, many children, [Polish]. And the [Polish] was for boys only.

LEVINE: Did you have brothers and sisters?

JUSSEM: I had brothers and sisters. One brother I brought to America yet, in 1938, just before the war broke out. Matter of fact, he died a year ago. Just, not a year ago, about eight months ago, in a town in Israel. I brought him over to America. He, instead of going to the shop, became a chicken farmer. At that time, it was [unclear] chicken farmers, or egg farmers, just for using eggs. And then it went out. I mean, they didn't give them any more living. Then they sold the farm and went to Israel. And then he was already getting American Social Security. And American Social Security, two people, him and his wife, could live easily. A daughter was in Israel already by then. Their daughter went to Israel [unclear]. She's now a mother over there of three kids.

LEVINE: Okay, so do you have any recollections of your grandparents or your mother and father, from Poland?

JUSSEM: Very little, very little. My memory doesn't work; I have very little.

LEVINE: Any customs that you remember from there, that didn't really carry over to this country?

JUSSEM: You see, I became a radical; I broke with all the customs. I broke with going to Shul. I became a radical; I joined the Communist Party, or Young Communist League, when I was young. And then, it was a continued splitting. Then I became partly a Trotskyite.

LEVINE: This started when you were still in Poland?

JUSSEM: No, no, it started—everything here.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, so tell me about your leaving Poland, and making your way to this country. What did you do?

JUSSEM: Before I left, I took over—Father died, and I took over the buying and selling. And I took it over. I took it over. I think Mother was baking some bread, baking bread, selling bread. Everybody there was baking bread. Everybody was selling bread. And this is about all. Let's make it as short as possible.

LEVINE: Okay. So then, you decided to come here?

JUSSEM: Yeah, I decided, sure. Everybody wanted to come here. We couldn't come here then. Yet there were some people that helped us getting visas. He told me that he'll get me a visa to the United States, but then it came out that the visa was to Canada.

LEVINE: Oh, so you paid somebody thinking you were getting one?

JUSSEM: Yeah, at that time, at that time about fifty dollars, in 1924, which it was an awful lot of money.

LEVINE: So in other words, you thought you were going to get one to the United States, but when you got it, it was—

JUSSEM: It was Canada.

LEVINE: Canada. So what did you do?

JUSSEM: I came here, and it was to Canada; I went to Canada. And then after being in Canada three or four weeks, I smuggled in.

LEVINE: How did you get—do you remember the ship that you—you said the Roosevelt?

JUSSEM: Yeah, that was it.

LEVINE: You were like a stowaway, or how did you--?

JUSSEM: No, no, no, we got the ship's card. For fifty dollars, they gave us the ship's card, and the visa, and everything. They called it a [Yiddish], somebody that knows how to make up things, got the visa for me.

LEVINE: So did that Roosevelt, the ship the Roosevelt, did that come into the New York harbor?

JUSSEM: Yeah.

LEVINE: Did you have anything to do with Ellis Island at that point?

JUSSEM: Yeah, she came to Ellis Island. Originally, they let us off at Ellis Island, and from Ellis Island with the small boats, we came to the south ferry, it was. And then they took us by subway. Then we were told to take the subway and go to Penn Station. The train was leaving from Penn Station to Canada. And at Penn Station, we thought maybe there was a—we found out there was another station, Grand Central, and we thought maybe there was a later train, and we ran to Grand Central Station. But there was no later train, and we came back, and we went to Canada. And being in Canada for a while, about maybe a couple of months, smuggled in here. We were caught in Rutland, Vermont. In, somewhere in Vermont. Vermont is bordering with Quebec.

LEVINE: Vermont?

JUSSEM: Vermont, yeah.

LEVINE: So who were you with?

JUSSEM: Another couple of boys, also that wanted to come.

LEVINE: They were from your town, from your shtetl?

JUSSEM: No, no, not from shtetl.

LEVINE: All right, so when you smuggled in, how did you do it?

JUSSEM: I smuggled in, and then since I was arrested, then an aunt of mine came, and they bailed me out. At that five hundred dollars. She was [unclear]. They had a meeting, called the family. I mean, nobody had—five hundred dollars was—at bail, five hundred dollars to let me out.

LEVINE: Were you in jail in Vermont?

JUSSEM: Yeah, in Rutland, Vermont, in jail, yeah. I was jailed in Vermont. I don't know whether they have a record of me there. Most likely they do, at jail, maybe they have.

LEVINE: So your wealthy aunt bailed you out?

JUSSEM: Yeah, bailed me out.

LEVINE: And then what?

JUSSEM: Then I had to pay it up. Yeah, I worked a season in the mountains, after I made a couple of dollars, as a busboy, and a [unclear]. I did everything; I did everything. And I remained after the season with the five hundred dollars, and I gave it to her.

LEVINE: Now, what was her name?

JUSSEM: Ida Ginsberg. She isn't alive anymore.

LEVINE: Okay, so where did you—when you first came, then, you went right to the mountains and worked?

JUSSEM: No, no when I first came, I went in all kinds of jobs. I worked on Coney Island, yelling, "Ice cold creamy root beer!" You see, the R was always so hard for me to pronounce: R, R, R, R. And I had to yell: Ice cold creamy root beer! I was [unclear] ice cream.

LEVINE: So were you living with one of your aunts at first, or how?

JUSSEM: I stayed in the beginning for a while with one of my aunts, but the minute I could get something for me. I paid five dollars a month for a room, although I [unclear] with somebody. At my aunt's I didn't pay anything.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So okay, so you worked Coney Island--?

JUSSEM: I worked on Coney Island, and then I worked, or they tried to teach me a job, in a shop to do some sewing. I never became an operator; I became a presser.

LEVINE: Okay, so you went then to the mountains, and you worked there for the summer. You paid back your aunt?

JUSSEM: Yeah. And then I went, the minute I went back to Canada, although she got back the bail. When they received that from the border, that I left the United States, she got back her bail. Even [unclear] I remember things were. And I would like it should come to an end.

LEVINE: Say it again?

JUSSEM: I would like it that the interview should come to an end.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Okay, is there anything else that you want to say about your later life here?

JUSSEM: Later life, I was romancing, I was quite successful with ladies. I don't know.

LEVINE: And how about—do you want to talk about becoming a Communist, and being radical, in this country?

JUSSEM: Most of the immigrants, they didn't have any trades, and they had hard—there were problems here. All radicalism in America were a Jewish business. The goy weren't any. If there was a goy here or there, let's say [unclear], or this one was [unclear], we paid him for it! We gave him our dollars, we gave him everything. Most of them were drunkards, most of the Goyim. The idea is for Jews. Not only the Communist Party. The anarchists were Jews; the socialists here in America. There were socialists before communism, [unclear]. There were all kinds of groups, parties, that all were just among the Jews, just among the Jews. Always they looked for justice; they wanted to change the world, everything [unclear]. And the [unclear] were Jews, and the Trotskyites were Jews. Someone by the name of Max Scheckman, brilliant mind. Someone by the name of Jay Loftston.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you hoped would happen, you personally, when you were active?

JUSSEM: I hoped the world would go to socialism. Especially at the time of the crisis, one of the slogans were that socialism knocks on the doors already. Capitalism comes to an end.

LEVINE: Now, was this after the stock market crash, and into the thirties?

JUSSEM: Yeah, this was in the thirties, after the stock market. The crisis—Hoovervilles. There was Hoovervilles in America; they built houses, and not houses, some kind of tents, somebody [unclear]. Hoovervilles. The crisis was under Hoover. It started with Coolidge, and then it finished with Hoover.

LEVINE: Now do you remember at some point becoming disenchanted?

JUSSEM: Yeah, then I became very much. Then, as a matter of fact, from left, from radicalism, I went to extreme right.

LEVINE: Oh! And did you stay there, or did you swing back?

JUSSEM: No, in general, I became more and more conservative.

LEVINE: Do you have any [unclear] with those ideas that you were so enamored with back in the thirties?

JUSSEM: Those ideas—it was a better world. It was a better world. That’s what Jews were always looking for, for a better world.

LEVINE: Why did you not choose to go to Israel, instead of--?

JUSSEM: Hm?

LEVINE: Why did you choose the United States, rather than Israel?

JUSSEM: Because, it was also, you couldn’t get into Israel. England controlled Israel. And it was very hard to get in to Israel. First of all, the Arabs didn’t want us there. It wasn’t a land that was free of everything. It was a habitat, it had people there.

LEVINE: And will you talk a little bit about having stayed in the Chelsea Hotel, how you happened to stay there?

JUSSEM: I happened to stay there because the cooperative houses came up. Then we had a house in Brooklyn. Then we sold the house, and we wanted to get into a coop.

LEVINE: This was when you were married?

JUSSEM: Yeah, when I was married. The coop, the person was [unclear]. Then when we moved into the Chelsea, my wife liked it so much that the coop came up, and we didn’t move there. Because—we didn’t move there, because they were talking about a coop her. Here it’s, the neighborhood is better, because it’s right near the garment center. Because I was a presser, and she was a finisher, and we worked. Then we wait ‘til ready for this one. And then even when this one came up, my wife didn’t want to move in, because for two people working, coming home, coming home, finding their house made, with room service and everything! Then she didn’t want to move here. And then she got very sick. She knew it was cancer, and she knew she was dying. Then she tried to get me out of there. Then we moved here, and she was here about three or four months, and she passed away.

LEVINE: What was life like in the Chelsea?

JUSSEM: For a woman it was easier. I mean, coming home, and then all our shopping used to come to the desk. Whatever she didn’t like, she sent it back to the desk. And then she was afraid to come. It’s in the center of everything, you know, always were—the desk that sits open twenty-four hours a day, they have people there. And then, bell-boys.

LEVINE: And how about famous people that you may have encountered during those years?

JUSSEM: [Pause] Also, my memory doesn't serve me. My memory doesn't serve. One of them that I was very close was [unclear]. The Sawyer brothers, one of them stayed there. There were three brothers, the Sawyers. One of them lived on the same floor I lived, Moses Sawyer. At a certain time, Rafael Sawyer also lived there. She had somebody by the name, a sculptor by the name of Shapshick that I was close with. I mean, by living there, you get acquainted with many, with many characters. And not only painters; there were writers also.

LEVINE: Was it known as an artist's hotel at that time?

JUSSEM: Yeah, sure, sure. Very much so. Now, you have European artists there. That hotel is more busy than the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. I mean, in the average per room, less vacancies than the big hotels in the city. It's a very successful hotel, as far as a money maker. And then it's a city [unclear]. They can't take it off.

LEVINE: Right, it's an historic landmark, I guess.

JUSSEM: A landmark, yeah.

LEVINE: Now, what was your wife's name?

JUSSEM: Sonia.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

JUSSEM: Her maiden name was Mazer, M-A-Z-E-R.

LEVINE: Now was she active with you in the kinds of social things?

JUSSEM: A little was active. As a matter of fact I found out also that she was in opposition. We were always in opposition, in opposition against everything.

LEVINE: And did you spend a lot of time with other people who had immigrated to this country?

JUSSEM: Most of the time with them. All the organizations, cultural organizations, are always immigrants. Even now, I read mainly Yiddish.

LEVINE: Okay, let's see. When you look back on it now, coming here?

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JUSSEM: Oh, I would have done things altogether different. First of all, I would have gone to school. Everybody told me that I would have made a good accountant, because I'm very good in mathematics.

LEVINE: Why didn't you go to school?

JUSSEM: Because we worked at that time ten hours a day. I mean, there wasn't—and then, I went a little bit, but I learned very little. Maybe because I didn't have the head for it; I don't know.

LEVINE: How about what you feel satisfied about, that you've done in your life?

JUSSEM: Nothing. A man without children!

LEVINE: Apparently you were active in a lot cultural and—

JUSSEM: Yeah, yeah, still, no. Still, [unclear], then I lived. But before, I've been for so many years in America I lived on Second Avenue. It was also cultural center, Second Avenue. Warren Hall, 166 Second Avenue.

LEVINE: Do you remember the Yiddish Theater when it was in its heyday?

JUSSEM: Yeah, sure. Sure, I remember Morris Schwartz. I remember all the other ones, [unclear]. And now, let's go to the end.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I just want to say thank you very much. We're going to close the interview.

JUSSEM: Yeah, I thank you that you're paying, that you're investing so much time on me.

LEVINE: Oh, well I think it's very, very interesting. And I'm talking to Max Jussem here in Chelsea, New York.

JUSSEM: The neighborhood is Chelsea, yeah.

LEVINE: And it's July 12th, 1996. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm going to sign off.

END OF INTERVIEW