

EI-807  
SAMUEL EPSTEIN  
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INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST  
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE  
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

POLAND  
AGE: 16

SHIP:  
PORT:  
RESIDENCES:  
? POLAND: WOJKOWICE  
? US: NY, NY; LONGMEADOW, MA

SIGRIST: Today is Wednesday, September 25, 1996 and I'm at the Jewish Nursing Home in Longmeadow, Massachusetts.

EPSTEIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And my name is Paul Sigrist.

EPSTEIN: Paul.

SIGRIST: Yeah, and I'm here with Mr. Samuel Epstein.

EPSTEIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Correct? Sam, what country did you come from?

EPSTEIN: Originally?

SIGRIST: Originally?

EPSTEIN: Originally I came from - was Poland, Warsaw. But there it was -- the - the - the city was Wojkowice [ph].

SIGRIST: Is that where you born?

EPSTEIN: I guess so.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

EPSTEIN: I think you'll find a part of it - one little bit --.

SIGRIST: Okay, well, we'll look at that later. Do you know what your birth date is? What's your birthday?

EPSTEIN: Up here, I don't know. It's the same thing - I -- When I came here, I came to different country sto--..

SIGRIST: What year did you come to America?

EPSTEIN: America? [pause] Nine-- I came here already - not from -- from my country.

SIGRIST: From Poland. Do you remember what year it was that you came?

EPSTEIN: 1900, I think, or something like it.

SIGRIST: You think it was sometime around 1900. Uh-huh. Do you remember how old you were when you came?

EPSTEIN: When I came here is-- I came from Argentina.

SIGRIST: Oh, you had gone from Poland to Argentina.

EPSTEIN: First.

SIGRIST: First. Uh-huh. Do you remember what year that you were born?

EPSTEIN: Actually, October -- . I think--I know today it's about a hundred. Right now I'm about-- a hundred and five years old.

SIGRIST: A hundred and what?

EPSTEIN: Five.

SIGRIST: A hundred and five. Yeah. Well, I'll--sorry. I'll check all that when we go downstairs.

EPSTEIN: Okay.

SIGRIST: Do you remember being a little child in Poland?

EPSTEIN: Must have been a small child yet, because my mother was breast feeding me yet.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how old you were when you went to Argentina?

EPSTEIN: Went to Argentina I was seventeen or sixteen years old.

SIGRIST: You were about sixteen or seventeen when you went to Argentina?

EPSTEIN: I think so.

SIGRIST: Were you in Poland all the time before you went to Argentina?

EPSTEIN: Have there be chas--these fights, you know, be-- Poland and Russia -- [sighs] . [pause] Didn't remember that with the year. I went away from there, from the--from there. I didn't want to be in the army.

SIGRIST: You didn't want to be in the army.

EPSTEIN: It was already 1921. They would take me to the army. My father was very Jewi - sure -- to that, you know and - and didn't want it that way. That's where I wound up to Argentina.

SIGRIST: I see, so he--so you were sent to Argentina so you wouldn't have to fight in the army.

EPSTEIN: Both.

SIGRIST: Yeah. What was your father's name?

EPSTEIN: My father's name? They used to call him Alta.

SIGRIST: Walter?

EPSTEIN: Alta.

SIGRIST: Alta. And -

EPSTEIN: Epstein.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what he did for a living in Poland?

EPSTEIN: He was always-be - be it's with parents and they built them up big business. In the Jew - the Gentile before they got married, they had to buy a kufert [trunk] like-like where the - that kufert was really very [not understood] box. Otherwise, they didn't get married. Because - so -- this was our business. We used to go to all these markets Europe. They traveled with the big loads of kufert because they - they didn't get married till one of them buy that kufert. Kufert was this -- like a big pa-- just a regular.

SIGRIST: A box of some sort?

EPSTEIN: All different. All different kinds of colors. We had them like twenty-four, twenty-five people working for us. That's - that's only in the wood work.. All the painting and everything else, my father, whatever in the family was, they used to do it.

SIGRIST: Did you help out doing that?

EPSTEIN: Sure.

SIGRIST: Yeah? What was your job specifically?

EPSTEIN: Now?

SIGRIST: Then.

EPSTEIN: Then. I was not even before it -- they kept me taking through seventeen, eighteen years in school until I got up to the bigger classes. Then they took me. They left me part there and part working in the shop.

SIGRIST: I see. So you had to go to school and then when you got older, then you only had to go to school part of the time and you had to work in the shop part of the time.

EPSTEIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yes.

EPSTEIN: Then it came because going into the army. My father was very religious. He knew that we -- up there he can't be the boss. He can't go - he can't go davenin [reciting scripture] there. He can't—he can't do anything in the Jewish, so he made an agreement somehow, sent me out to—to Argentina.

SIGRIST: To Argentina. What was your mother's name?

EPSTEIN: Elke.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

EPSTEIN: Eh?

SIGRIST: How do you spell her name?

EPSTEIN: E-L-K-E.

SIGRIST: Elke.

EPSTEIN: Elke.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Do you remember what her maiden name was, before she was married?

EPSTEIN: That was her maiden name, Elke.

SIGRIST: Okay. Do you know how your mother and father met?

EPSTEIN: They met through the Jewish meeting once. He was very religious. Very religious. He came there, somebody introduced my mother. She just came to the meeting and then they started in for a couple, two weeks and then they got married.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's personality like?

EPSTEIN: Oh, she—she also—well, she was more - more a little bit on the light side see. He -- would do perfect -- anything for the religious

side.. Anything. He'd close up the shop, give everybody the day off. Was most of them were gentile - the hand workers.

SIGRIST: The people who worked for him?

EPSTEIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: They were mostly gentiles.

EPSTEIN: Gentile.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

EPSTEIN: And that's all. They made good - good money. That was- we - he's always good to help. Always.

SIGRIST: Do-do you remember the house that you lived in when you were a child?

EPSTEIN: Well, we had-we had a house and the shop was also built up into part of the house. Made a shop. Then we had to - they give up another room because they were so busy. Went to every little city or what market. There the gentile to sell their materials. They used to have monthly market. So we -- we used to go to every one of them.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things would you buy at the monthly market?

EPSTEIN: Our-ourselves mostly something for the shop and something for the children. You know. And my brother was already -- when they got married. Both of them used to go. Some of them, he could stay overnight. Some of them, he could take it in the morning.

SIGRIST: So the markets were in different places.

EPSTEIN: Yeah, sure.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

EPSTEIN: That w-that was always gentile markets.

SIGRIST: Gentile markets.

EPSTEIN: For the different small towns, too. He always been there. He got a book - a big -- everything out together and where it is. He would say this is a - a book or something like it. But was like [not understood] ], you know. Although the parents were - the parents very attached to the children, very.

SIGRIST: How many children did your mother and father have?

EPSTEIN: Let's see. Two, four. I think fi-- five.

SIGRIST: Five?

EPSTEIN: But I was the last one. Boyjshinik [ph]they used to call me.

SIGRIST: The surprise.

EPSTEIN: The boyjhinik.[ph] I was the last one.

SIGRIST: What was your favorite thing to do when you were a child?  
What did you enjoy doing the most when you were a little child?

EPSTEIN: Actually, mostly I couldn't do anything but the religious was simply so much in the way. Boitch!-- on a holiday or Saturday, oh, God. My wife--my fath - my father would me shmaysen [hit].

SIGRIST: He'd hit?

EPSTEIN: Yeah. He give me kick.

SIGRIST: What were some of the ways that you practiced your Jewish religion at home?

EPSTEIN: At home? Well, actually, everything kosher, hundred percent.

SIGRIST: Everything was kosher.

EPSTEIN: Everything kosher even when we left - we left the town -- left the city. I was always in watching sports all my life. Sports was my best - even the best over the religion sometimes. On a Saturday did it - if we had - You know, the group what we had. He didn't like it because it's Saturday, but he - he figured out and do. So he used to told my mother, "Elke-Elke, let him gehen.[go] Let him have something his way, as long as it's not Saturday." During the week, it was got it out something that's don't work. Both of them were very religious.

SIGRIST: What sport was your favorite sport when you were growing up?

EPSTEIN: When I was growing up, actually, up there we're playing ball. What they call it? Tennis. And baseball.

SIGRIST: Hmm?

EPSTEIN: It's like a baseball.

SIGRIST: Baseball, uh-huh.

EPSTEIN: Tennis, were I liked - I liked it best.

SIGRIST: When you lived in Poland, before you went to Argentina, what kind of food did you eat?

EPSTEIN: Only kosher.

SIGRIST: You said only kosher, but what is kosher food? Can you just describe what-

EPSTEIN: I tell you either if it li-- lyses only on bread and butter -- a milkhaki [dairy]. Or take a little salami yiddishe, eat it delicatessen. When I left my city, I have never been to a delicatessen store in Wojkowice.

SIGRIST: Was that before you went to Argentina?

EPSTEIN: Hmm?

SIGRIST: Was that before you went to Argentina?

EPSTEIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

EPSTEIN: [not understood] It was like ca-like catered parties, not only for the Jews. They came to--some goyim came and saw it. So every time they had a big party, I had to cater it. It have to be kosher. They used to just buy the [not understood]. I had everything there for a hundred and two hundred people. That was a job and a half, believe me. And I had to train everybody there. [unclear] I had to train a little [unclear]. Like they had--let me see, four, eight, ten. They had carpenters in the house, so they work partially the house and they have a separate room. The storage room was probably three times as big as this room, or four times. They used to have the kufert lined up to the ceiling and then walk to the markets. We used to rent to local - to local gentiles. We were about four or five blocks. Four blocks away it was. They have to go to the [unclear] market and then they [unclear]. Mostly gentile.

SIGRIST: Did the Jews ever set up at the markets, or did they just buy at the markets?

EPSTEIN: They used to buy and they used to sell for different things. Different things they sold, too. By that, you know, the only ones in the state. That was our business.

SIGRIST: How did the Jewish population and the gentile population get along in Poland?

EPSTEIN: Very good.

SIGRIST: They got along well.

EPSTEIN: Yeah, there. In some of the big cities, no. There used to be fights and everything else. They get the calls, the calls were mostly gentile. All gentile.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm.

EPSTEIN: Everything else. That's what did. [background voices]

SIGRIST: Let me just shut your door a little, for a second, because they're--excuse me. [shuts door]

EPSTEIN: When I came here, I was just a hundred years old.

SIGRIST: When you came to this nursing home, you were a hundred? Um, you said that you went to Argentina to avoid going into the army in Poland.

EPSTEIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about going—the trip from Poland to Argentina?

EPSTEIN: Well, we took the big boat several days.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the boat?

EPSTEIN: Hmm?

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the boat that you took from—

EPSTEIN: No.

SIGRIST: No?

EPSTEIN: Took a big boat. We came to Argentina and Argentina I liked very much.

SIGRIST: Did anything happen on the boat ride to Argentina that you remember?

EPSTEIN: Not—too unusual but one thing -- mostly Jewish people, they had to have Jewish food. [unclear] [laughs]

SIGRIST: Were there lots of Jewish people in Argentina?

EPSTEIN: In Argentina, oh, many, yeah, but it's a funny thing when thing has to happen. Somebody in my city had relatives there. They used to talk a lot about it, those things. And I spoke to them that they said, "I think the best thing would be there in Argentina, because up there is not only one way." You got four, five different languages. And you could find a lot of Jews there. [unclear] A lot of the Jews moved there because of the language, the religion. So they moved it up there and naturally, I knew a lot. Somewhere around there, I think I have weekly report. Tells you -- you see the little [unclear] ring?

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm.

EPSTEIN: That comes from Europe.

SIGRIST: Oh, I'll take a look at that after we're done.

EPSTEIN: Go ahead, take a look at it.

SIGRIST: Um, how long did you stay in Argentina?

EPSTEIN: Argentina, I was-- think about four years.

SIGRIST: Four years in Argentina. What did you do during those four years for a living?

EPSTEIN: For living? As a carpenter, I knew a little. So I worked in the shop part time there, and then somebody saw me and they took me, making something else. Machinery study. They helped, and I did that and that's all I did. I always came out on top somehow. I -- I usually - the Argentine never believed -- they were so excite with how much money they pay me. Now the - the - the Argentine-that-

SIGRIST: What language did you speak? I keep hitting your foot, I'm sorry. What language did you speak in Argentina?

EPSTEIN: Spanish.

SIGRIST: You spoke Spanish. What language did you speak in Poland?

EPSTEIN: Polish.

SIGRIST: Polish. Did you speak Yiddish at all?

EPSTEIN: Oh, yeah, yeah. Lot of Yiddish. Jewish with Jews, goyim with goyim, you know.

SIGRIST: So when you got to Argentina, were you still speaking Yiddish when you got there?

EPSTEIN: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: There were enough Jews there that-

EPSTEIN: I met -- somebody I knew there that's I came to them and they gave me a home until I find something. Up in Argentina, I [not understood] , I loved it. Different life altogether.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

EPSTEIN: No hustle bustle. Everything was seven hours, eight hours. That's how it is. I loved it.

SIGRIST: So it was much more relaxed.

EPSTEIN: More relaxed, yeah.

SIGRIST: Than it had been in Poland.

EPSTEIN: That's - that's under [not understood].

SIGRIST: Did your parents come to Argentina ever? Did they ever come to Argentina?

EPSTEIN: No.

SIGRIST: No, they stayed in Poland.

EPSTEIN: Because that is not so religious -- you don't like it here. There are Jews a lot, but I think the religion [unclear]. Myself, I kept myself pretty religious. I found a very big shul [synagogue]. Used to go there davenin. Saturday till w--work That's all.

SIGRIST: Your father would have been very proud that you observed Saturday.

EPSTEIN: My father - my father was also in America.

SIGRIST: Oh, he had come to America.

EPSTEIN: He was in America.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Do you remember when he went to America?

EPSTEIN: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: No. Were you still in Poland when he went to America?

EPSTEIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You were still in Poland, uh-huh. When your father came to America, where did he go? What city did he live in in America? [pause] Don't remember?

EPSTEIN: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Okay, that's okay.

EPSTEIN: I don't remember the city.

SIGRIST: It was a long time ago.

EPSTEIN: I know. Oh, quite long.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

EPSTEIN: I'm a hundred years old,, already.

SIGRIST: Yeah, more than that.

EPSTEIN: What I am here.

SIGRIST: You were in Argentina for four years, that's what you said.

EPSTEIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Why did you want to leave Argentina and go to the United States?

EPSTEIN: Because that my father was before me, you know, and they knew that guy like me rises fast . So he could make a lot of money there. Then he came back, also. People-account of religion. He was very religious. He lived-right the back of our apartment, it was the schul.

SIGRIST: The schul was in the back of your apartment.

EPSTEIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

EPSTEIN: So they didn't have to travel. Just get up, walk in. He walk in - he walk in in the schul.

SIGRIST: I see.

EPSTEIN: He was very strict.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about leaving Argentina? What did you have to do when you got ready to leave Argentina to come to the United States?

EPSTEIN: Somebody, a friend of mine, was there before me, and he kept on writing to me. He said, "Sam, why don't you come in Argentina. There you could make a big living and keep your religion."

SIGRIST: But when you were leaving Argentina, when you were getting ready to leave Argentina-did you come to America from Argentina?

EPSTEIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yes. Do you remember the trip from Argentina to America?

EPSTEIN: I'm trying to remember them who was here, too. I know it was -- . My father gave me a couple addresses to go to. Lived with them part time, you know. two month or so also all of them [not understood] ] because there's a shul there to meet.

SIGRIST: Right. Right. Do you remember-do you remember coming to America? Do you remember when you arrived in America?

EPSTEIN: My father was here. My father was in America those years.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Did you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you were on the ship?

EPSTEIN: I saw a lot of things on the ship didn't see anywhere else.

SIGRIST: Right.

EPSTEIN: That's what interested me so much, to keep riding around.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing Ellis Island? Did you have to go to Ellis Island?

EPSTEIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything about it?

EPSTEIN: Anything about it? [pause] I think it comes -- somewhere there I got a history about it, I think.

SIGRIST: Yeah, there's an article you have hanging on the wall, and I'll look at that when we're done. We're almost done. When you landed in the United States, where did you go?

EPSTEIN: We had plans there for a long time before. Before my father went, so that's where we went. They - they showed us what to do and whom to go to. They got us sh-- working right away.

SIGRIST: What job did you get?

EPSTEIN: The first job?

SIGRIST: The first job.

EPSTEIN: Let me see. Work for the Jews, I know that. A Jewish shop. It was [not understood] it right here in America --in New York. No, Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: In Brooklyn?

EPSTEIN: In Brooklyn, and I stayed with them until I --.

SIGRIST: Did you like America when you got here?

EPSTEIN: At first, only my father did like it, but he didn't like the Saturday working. It always bothered his mind terribly. Just on, I think five or ten years just after he died. Then I left.

SIGRIST: Well, Sam, why don't we--we'll stop now and I'll take a look at the article that you have hanging on the wall.

EPSTEIN: Right.

SIGRIST: That may be able to fill in some of the dates and things.

EPSTEIN: I had--I had one planned for long time ago.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

EPSTEIN: [unclear].

SIGRIST: There's one right there.

EPSTEIN: Somebody took it away and it looks attention and 'member it, you know. I was here for a hundred years.

SIGRIST: Right. Well, Sam, thank you very much. I appreciate you letting me ask the questions.

EPSTEIN: You're welcome.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Sam Epstein.

EPSTEIN: You'll be able - you be able to write something about it?

SIGRIST: (laughs) At the Longmeadow Jewish Nursing Home on Wednesday, September 25th, 1996.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

EI-807/EPSTEIN