

EI-811

CELIA (SILKA) ZELLER

BIRTHDATE: OCTOBER 16, 1906

INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 27, 1996

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 89

RUNNING TIME: 25:00

INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST

RECORDING ENGINEER: PAUL SIGRIST

INTERVIEW LOCATION: LONGMEADOW, MASS

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

AUSTRIA, 1913

AGE 6

SHIP:

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, September 27th, 1996. I'm in Longmeadow, Massachusetts at the Jewish Nursing Home and I'm here with—is your first Celia?

ZELLER: C-E-L-I-A.

SIGRIST: Celia Zeller.

ZELLER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Z-E-L-L-E-R.

CZ: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And what was the country that you came from, Austria?

ZELLER: Yeah, I came from—let me talk fast. The capital of Austria, Chernovitz.
[PH]

SIGRIST: Chernovitz.

ZELLER: Austria.

SIGRIST: That was the—the town that you were born in?

ZELLER: Born, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your birth date is?

ZELLER: Yes. Now, remember in Europe it wasn't so [unclear] down there.

SIGRIST: Right.

ZELLER: Europe. As far as I know, it's October 16, 1906.

SIGRIST: 1906, and—[phone rings]—and you—you think that when you came to this country you were how old?

ZELLER: Let me—let me think again.

SIGRIST: Sure, go ahead.

ZELLER: My father brought us over. I was six years old.

SIGRIST: You were about six years old. [someone speaking on intercom in background]

ZELLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. So, you probably came to this country maybe 1912-1913?

ZELLER: A year before the war.

SIGRIST: 1913.

ZELLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: 1913. Great. Mrs. Zeller, can you tell me what your name was when you were born in Austria?

ZELLER: Yes. [pause] I know it, but I forgot it.

SIGRIST: Well, what was your maiden name before you were married? Zeller is a—is your married name?

ZELLER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes.

ZELLER: Yes. Beck, B-E-C-K.

SIGRIST: B-E-C-K. Great. When you say that you were born in—in Chernovitz—

ZELLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Is that in the country of Austria or the—

ZELLER: Yes, that's the capital.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh or—what I'm wondering is was it the Austro-Hungarian Empire?

ZELLER: It was part of the Austrian Empire. It was the capital city of Austria.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What—what do you remember as a—[intercom]—as a young girl about that? About living there?

ZELLER: Well, as a young girl I came over to this country, so you see, I wasn't a young girl in—

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories of Europe? Like—like the house that you lived in?

ZELLER: Yes, we lived with my grandfather and grandmother. My father was in America writing my mother letters. I could write a book on that.

SIGRIST: Well, what were some of the things he was saying about America?

ZELLER: It's a beautiful country, but I—we should stay in Europe. He had a girlfriend.

SIGRIST: Here in the United States?

ZELLER: [unclear] Huh?

SIGRIST: He had a girlfriend in the United States?

ZELLER: Yes. Yeah, but in Europe, here people went to lawyers. In Europe you went to the rabbi. That I still remember that my mother went to the rabbi

and showed a letter that my father—in those years [unclear] telephone. It was letters. So he wrote a letter to my father, “Shame on you. You got three beautiful children here and you want to leave them? Well, who are you leaving them to? To two old people? “ You know, he gave him—that I still remember, as little I was. That kind of put him to shame that a rabbi should write him a letter like that. So it didn’t take long that he sent us what do you call it? A—

SIGRIST: Money?

ZELLER: No. A—a—what do you call when you go on a boat?

SIGRIST: Ticket?

ZELLER: Yeah, tickets for to go on a boat to come to America. And of course, my grandfather—they all [unclear]. My grandfather used to make money making [unclear]. You know what [unclear] are? What you bury people in. Those shrouds.

SIGRIST: A shroud, uh-huh.

ZELLER: So he used to make money like. So he—he used to help us a little bit.

SIGRIST: Can you say that word slowly for me once?

ZELLER: What?

SIGRIST: [unclear]

ZELLER: [unclear – no clue how to spell this Hebrew word] See, [unclear], how to you say hah?

SIGRIST: Like C-H-E, hah?

ZELLER: Something like that. [unclear].

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ZELLER: That means those white shrouds.

SIGRIST: Burial shrouds.

ZELLER: That’s—that’s what they were, burial shroud.

SIGRIST: Is that a Yiddish word [unclear]?

ZELLER: [unclear]. That I can't tell you if it's a—a—what's it?

SIGRIST: Hebrew?

ZELLER: Hebrew word.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What language did you speak in Europe?

ZELLER: Yiddish.

SIGRIST: Yiddish.

ZELLER: Yeah, only Yiddish.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. So you started saying your grandfather did what? He made the shrouds. He gave you money or—

ZELLER: Right, there was—see, my father was in America so we lived with my grandfather and grandmother. There was three of us, two brothers and me, and my—there was no telephone call. Was used to be by letter. “Shame on you. You got a beautiful family,” you know, [unclear] the rabbi got into it [unclear]. It's a terrible thing I'm talking about a history of my own family.

SIGRIST: Where was your father living in the United States?

ZELLER: New York.

SIGRIST: He was in New York City?

ZELLER: See, he was in the garment industry. He was a tailor, so he worked in the garment industry. [phone rings]

SIGRIST: Is that what he had done in Europe?

ZELLER: Evidently.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ZELLER: He was a tailor. Everybody, you know, they work in these little shops in Europe. [phone rings]

SIGRIST: What do you remember about life with your mother and your brothers before you left Austria?

ZELLER: It was very difficult. Our poor mother, our father was busy carousing here in the country and my mother had to depend on two old people. This I knew.

SIGRIST: Those were her parents? Your mother's parents.

ZELLER: No, my father's parents.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh, and this is the—the grandfather that made the shrouds?

ZELLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ZELLER: Right.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about your grandparents and what sticks out in your mind about them?

ZELLER: I'll tell you, they were plain, old grandparents. Maybe not so old, but to me, you know. She used to cook good.

SIGRIST: What did she cook?

ZELLER: Chicken—those years, chicken soup. You know, things like that and she used to make knadle. [PH]You know, that's the little balls in chicken soup. They didn't make big fusses in those years.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the house where you lived with them, what it looked like?

ZELLER: Well, that's one thing I tell you so. My grandfather did pretty good in his work. I mean, that I remember. We had a brick house, which was very unusual that you had a good house. We lived with them, but you had to go to the toilet in the backyard, see. And otherwise, it was a simple house. Had a big fireplace and my brother used to sleep on top of the fireplace. See, that I remember.

SIGRIST: It comes back to you as you talk.

ZELLER: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the furniture in the house?

ZELLER: No, that I can't even tell you.

SIGRIST: You mentioned your brother. Are your brothers older than you?

ZELLER: Yes, all of them are.

SIGRIST: What were their names?

ZELLER: One was—are you a Springfield man?

SIGRIST: No.

ZELLER: Oh. My brother was very popular. A very—in Springfield. He was a cost accountant, my brother.

SIGRIST: An accountant.

ZELLER: Yeah, he graduated University of Pennsylvania.

SIGRIST: What was his name? Old brother first.

ZELLER: Jonas Heit, H-E-I-T.

SIGRIST: H-I—

ZELLER: H-E-I-T. That was my maiden name.

SIGRIST: Oh, your maiden name is Heit?

ZELLER: H-E-I-T.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. You had told me a little earlier that Beck was your maiden name.

ZELLER: That was my mother's name.

SIGRIST: That was your mother's name.

ZELLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see, okay.

ZELLER: Beck.

SIGRIST: So—so your name when you were born was Celia Heit.

ZELLER: I was a Heit girl.

SIGRIST: Heit, okay. And so Jonas was the older brother.

ZELLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And what—who was the next brother?

ZELLER: Louie. Louis.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ZELLER: And then there was Maxie.

SIGRIST: Maxine?

ZELLER: No, Maxie.

SIGRIST: Maxie.

ZELLER: We called him Max.

SIGRIST: Was he born in the United States?

ZELLER: Yeah, all—

SIGRIST: After you got here.

ZELLER: M-A-X.

SIGRIST: I see, but the three of you were all born in Europe, Jonas—

ZELLER: Yeah, even Max. No, Max was born in America.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What were some of the things that your mother did to take care of the house in Austria?

ZELLER: She didn't work. So what could she do? Cook, clean like every—every mother does that.

SIGRIST: Did your mother want to come to the United States?

ZELLER: Of course. Of course she did, and there was a few years, I understand, by history, that he kept putting it off because he had a girlfriend here.

SIGRIST: But the intention was eventually that he would go and bring everybody over?

ZELLER: Well, it was—this I remember as a child. Neighbors had to come and write letters to my father. The rabbit wrote a letter to my father. [unclear]. You know, “Shame, you have the family here and you’re neglecting them,” and this and that. So by shame he took us over.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about getting ready to leave Austria? Do you remember packing or anything?

ZELLER: Oh, yeah. I remember packing and I remember riding in a—what do you call a horse and buggy? What do you call it?

SIGRIST: Carriage?

ZELLER: Yeah, to go and visit relatives to say so long. That I do remember.

SIGRIST: What did you pack?

ZELLER: What could I pack, a kid?

SIGRIST: What did your mother pack? Do you remember what the family took with them when they left?

ZELLER: Just a few clothes. Clothes. We couldn’t carry furniture. Maybe pictures or something like, my mother took, but I don’t remember big things. I haven’t got—I tell you, you took the wrong person.

SIGRIST: Well, you’re doing—you’re doing a great job. Really, you are. You’ve got a good memory.

ZELLER: Because I haven’t got a—a big history to tell you.

SIGRIST: You’re doing a great job.

ZELLER: I’m just a plain—I was a plain kid.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you remember visiting these relatives saying goodbye.

ZELLER: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about being a little girl and having to do that? Like, how did that make you feel?

ZELLER: I did. Are you Jewish?

SIGRIST: No.

ZELLER: I had a Bubba—that means grandmother.

SIGRIST: Bubba.

ZELLER: Bubba and she was the only one that I—no, I had two, another bubba with a zeida. [PH]You know what a zeida is? A grandfather. But that bubba, that was my mother's mother. She lived in—what's it? I'll think of the name. It's the capital of Austria. What is that?

SIGRIST: Well, you were saying that you came from Chernovitz.

ZELLER: That's it, capital of Austria, yeah. My grandmother lived there. So I used to go visit there.

SIGRIST: Yeah, what do you remember about her?

ZELLER: Just a little old lady.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying goodbye to her?

ZELLER: Of course, yeah. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind about having to do that?

ZELLER: Cry. But you see, she lived in Chernovitz and we lived in Vizchnitz. [PH]That's like Westfield out of Springfield.

SIGRIST: Vizchnitz.

ZELLER: Vizchnitz, see, and she lived in Chernovitz. That was a big city. I enjoyed the big city because they had a circus there, you know what I mean? Chernovitz.

SIGRIST: Do you remember going to the circus?

ZELLER: Sure, my grandfather—grandmother, grandfather took me there. Oh, sure they had a big circus.

SIGRIST: Did you see something at the circus that you had never seen before?

ZELLER: I don't remember. [intercom] A circus is a circus.

SIGRIST: A circus is a circus.

ZELLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where did your family have to go to get on the ship to come to America?

ZELLER: Yeah, that I remember. What a terrible thing.

SIGRIST: Where did you go from?

ZELLER: Uhh.

SIGRIST: How did you—what city did you get on the ship?

ZELLER: I have to think. Well, we were in Vienna. We did have to go to—I forgot.

SIGRIST: Forgot. Do you re—what do you remember about the ship? What—what memories?

ZELLER: Ship? I remember the—the name.

SIGRIST: What was the name?

ZELLER: Ship America.

SIGRIST: It was the America.

ZELLER: Ship America. Nice ship.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep on the ship?

ZELLER: We all had a cabin. Just my brothers, me, my mother. We had a cabin.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh, and what did you do during the day when you were on the ship?

ZELLER: Ran around like mashuginas. [PH]You know what that is?

SIGRIST: No.

ZELLER: Crazy.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What do you remember seeing while you were on the ship?

ZELLER: Well, we saw somebody fall overboard, but they got him. That experience I did see myself.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how they got him?

ZELLER: Huh?

SIGRIST: How did they get him out of the water, do you remember?

ZELLER: I don't know. They threw something. Yeah, I don't remember. I was a little girl, you know, but I knew they got him out.

SIGRIST: Well, that's interesting. I've never heard anyone say that before.

ZELLER: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember eating on the ship?

ZELLER: Yeah. It was all right.

SIGRIST: Where did you eat?

ZELLER: In a big, big room. Oh, I have to tell [unclear] I forgot. My mother—no, she didn't cook. Of course not. I forgot. But we ate some—

SIGRIST: It probably was in a big, big room, yeah. Do you remember how long the ship took to get to New York?

ZELLER: Seven days.

SIGRIST: About seven days. Did you see the Statue of Liberty when the ship—

ZELLER: Yes, I did. Absolutely. They pointed it out and we all went, saw.

SIGRIST: Now, tell me a little bit about what happened when the family ended up at Ellis Island. You told me a little bit before we started.

ZELLER: We were sitting. My poor mother was sitting in Ellis Island with the three of us. No father. Nobody came. My poor mother. I had an older brother, Jonas. He was one of the bright boys. He graduated University of Pennsylvania, but even as a child he was. So I remember my mother talking to him, "What's going to become of us if he doesn't come to pick us up? We're in Ellis Island now." But he came a day late.

SIGRIST: Did you stay over night at Ellis Island?

ZELLER: Of course.

SIGRIST: What do you remember?

ZELLER: On a bench. [intercom] When I see a bench, this is the kind of a bench we stayed over night. But I want to tell you something, you got—are you married?

SIGRIST: No.

ZELLER: My mother never forgot that night that we stayed in Ellis Island. She gave it to him twenty-four hours a day because he left her in Ellis Island. I [unclear] that. I mean, as a child you hear, you know.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about what it looked like?

ZELLER: Ellis Island?

SIGRIST: On the inside, yeah.

ZELLER: Oh, I don't know. Perhaps it doesn't even look like that now.

SIGRIST: No, it probably doesn't. So he finally came.

ZELLER: Yeah. [intercom] He came. He came and he had an apartment he fixed up for us in the Bronx. See, my father was a tailor and he always made a living. So we stayed in New York. We didn't stay very long because my father had a brother here in Springfield and he told him that he could get a job at this place where they make—you ever hear of Kinsler [PH] Company?

SIGRIST: Kinser?

ZELLER: Kinsler.

SIGRIST: Kinsler, no, I haven't.

ZELLER: No, they're still in business. [intercom] The boys took it over. What's that six pounds? [referring to what was said on the intercom} What is it?

SIGRIST: I don't know. I was thinking that myself.

ZELLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: So your family went up to Springfield then?

ZELLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember being put into school?

ZELLER: Yeah, by my uncle.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about that?

ZELLER: Oh, I don't talk about that. You know, my Jewish name is Silka.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

ZELLER: S-I-L-K-A.

SIGRIST: S-I-L-K-A, Silka.

ZELLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Silka.

ZELLER: Yeah. My father was working so my uncle put me—brought me to school. Brought us to enter school. Of course, they asked him, "What's her name?" "Silka." So went all through school with my name S-I-L-K-A until I graduated High Commerce, changed it to Celia. I changed it.

SIGRIST: What about learning English? Can you talk a little bit about that experience?

ZELLER: It was different. It was difficult.

SIGRIST: How was it difficult?

ZELLER: Well, you had to learn from other children. Grownups wouldn't spend any time with you? My folks didn't know how to talk English.

SIGRIST: Your father hadn't learned any English?

ZELLER: Bah!

SIGRIST: Not really?

ZELLER: Nah, not much. In those years, you know, when you're an immigrant, you're an immigrant.

SIGRIST: Did you—in Springfield, when you lived in Springfield did you live in an immigrant neighborhood?

ZELLER: With the—yes, all the time. Yes.

SIGRIST: What kinds of other people lived there?

ZELLER: Mostly Yiddish.

SIGRIST: So it was a Jewish neighborhood?

ZELLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ZELLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue?

ZELLER: Oh, yeah. Oh, are you kidding?

SIGRIST: Did you attend?

ZELLER: I was—I wasn't the type. Neither was my mother. My mother wasn't a—my father was, but we didn't—I didn't go.

SIGRIST: Were—because of the rather strained relationship that your parents had, was it difficult on the children once the family reunited?

ZELLER: It was difficult because we knew what happened and my mother used to give it to him every once in a while. So he knew it.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever get a job in the United States?

ZELLER: No, never.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ZELLER: No.

SIGRIST: Did your father become a citizen?

ZELLER: Oh, yeah. He was—he was a citizen. [intercom] So was my mother. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the experience? What—what your participation in their becoming a citizen, if there was any of your participation?

ZELLER: Those years, you just knew that you had to become a citizen without making too many things about it. You had to become a—a citizen and by my father becoming a citizen, I became—we all became one. See.

SIGRIST: I was just wondering if you remembered how people study or anything like that.

ZELLER: Nah. Nah.

SIGRIST: No. [intercom]

ZELLER: You know, those years it wasn't like today.

SIGRIST: Did you get a job when you got a little older?

ZELLER: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was the first job you got?

ZELLER: Working in bakery store.

SIGRIST: How old?

ZELLER: Jewish bakery. Thirteen years old.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh, and what did you have to do at the bakery?

ZELLER: So, I learned how to talk Polish because it was a Polish neighborhood. So I—I did my—whatever I had to do.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how much you earned?

ZELLER: Yeah, two and a half dollars a week.

SIGRIST: And what did you do with your money?

ZELLER: Give it to my folks. They needed it.

SIGRIST: What kind of work did your older brother—older brothers go into?

ZELLER: [takes a drink of water]

SIGRIST: Do you remember?

ZELLER: Summer they worked in tobacco fields. The summer and in the winter there was a cap company that made men's caps. After school they got jobs there. So they both went to college. They both.

SIGRIST: Did they also contribute their money to the—to the house?

ZELLER: Oh, yeah. Yes.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

ZELLER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did your mother or father ever want to go back to Europe?

ZELLER: No. No, life was difficult there. No. Not that—not that I ever heard [unclear], you know.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go back—

ZELLER: No.

SIGRIST: To see the town that you—

ZELLER: No.

SIGRIST: Did you ever have any interest in doing that?

ZELLER: No. No, not at all.

SIGRIST: When you think of yourself in terms of nationality, how do you think of yourself?

ZELLER: As—because I'm a Jew.

SIGRIST: Well, do you think of yourself as Jewish or as an American or a European or how do you think of yourself?

ZELLER: I'm an American, that's it. I don't think myself anything different. No, my children went to—are in school here and but no.

SIGRIST: Great. Mrs. Zeller, thank you very much.

ZELLER: Well, it was a pleasure.

SIGRIST: That wasn't so hard. You did a great job.

ZELLER: No. Well, I told you what I know.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Celia Zeller on Friday, September 27th, 1996 at the Jewish Nursing Home in Longmeadow. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

