

EI-814
MORRIS BIGMAN
BIRTHDATE: JULY 30, 1904
INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 29, 1996
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 92
RUNNING TIME:
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, Ph.D.
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

POLAND, 1920
AGE: 16

SHIP: THE LAPLAND
PORT: ANTWERP
RESIDENCES:
- POLAND: DUBOY
- US: NEW YORK, NY

LEVINE: Today is September 29th, 1996. It is the 75th anniversary of the week that Morris Bigman came here from what was then Poland, although it was Russia when he was born. But he came from Poland in 1920 at the age of sixteen. Today Mr. Bigman is ninety-two years of age and I'm delighted that you're here, and I'm looking forward to your story. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and we're here at the studio at Ellis Island.

If we could start at the beginning, Mr. Bigman. Where were you born?

BIGMAN: In a village by the name of Duboy.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

BIGMAN: D-U-B-O-Y.

LEVINE: And that was part of Russia?

BIGMAN: Part of Russia. It was about three miles away from the station Vidibor Stansiya (station), from the railroad Vidibor, V-I-D-B-O-R. Vidibor.

LEVINE: Is that far from the Polish border? Was that far from the border of what was Poland when you were born? No?

BIGMAN: That I don't remember. I don't recall that.

LEVINE: That, okay. And your birth date? Your birth date?

BIGMAN: Your birth date. July the 30th, 1904.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, your father's name?

BIGMAN: Nathan Bigman.

LEVINE: Now, was his name Beigel?

BIGMAN: Beigel. His name was Beigel.

LEVINE: And that's spelled B-E-I-G-E-L.

BIGMAN: Right.

LEVINE: Right, and your mother's name?

BIGMAN: My mother's name was Sarah Holtzman, maiden name Holtzman.

LEVINE: Okay, and did you have brothers and sisters when you were still in Europe?

BIGMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: And would you say their names and-their names and where you fit in?

BIGMAN: My oldest brother was Jack. Next there was a sister, Rachel. She passed away at the age of seventeen, before we came here. Then Morris Bigman, Ben Bigman and Samuel Bigman.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, what was your father doing for work when he was in Europe, in first Russia and then Poland?

BIGMAN: He was a carpenter.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about his work and what he did? What kinds of things he made?

BIGMAN: Hmm, not exactly, no. He was doing glazing, carpentry work. More or less jobbing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

BIGMAN: Anything pertaining with wood and glass. That was his job.

LEVINE: Do you remember the house you lived in? Do you remember the house you lived in?

BIGMAN: I do.

LEVINE: Could you describe it?

BIGMAN: Well, it was more or less of a village type home with two large rooms. One large room was like a dining room, sleeping quarters,

partly separated. A large kitchen with a brick oven for baking, cooking and heating. And a storeroom, an entry room and an attic.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now-

BIGMAN: A garden alongside of it.

LEVINE: Was this a small village that you lived in?

BIGMAN: Well, the village consisted of I would say about seventy-five families.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Were there any shops or do you remember anything about the main street?

BIGMAN: Well, the shops were more or less housed in their own home. Shoe repairs or shoe manufacturing-making shoes completely. Tailors making the clothing completely in the home.

LEVINE: How about baking? Did-was there a bake-

BIGMAN: No, individual bake-everyone bake for himself.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and how-was-was there a market? Was there a market day or days, do you remember?

BIGMAN: No, not in our village. No, we had to go to the town in order to find the marketplaces.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

BIGMAN: Not in the village.

LEVINE: And how about your mother, did she-what-what kinds of-she was raising the children. Did she do any other work?

BIGMAN: She was-my grandfather was selling clothing. Not made clothing, but material for clothe[s]. And my mother helped him in that line. And they or more less chan-- exchanged the material for different things like grains and-a barter system, more or less.

LEVINE: Now, this was your mother's father, who she helped?

BIGMAN: My mother's father, right. We lived together in the same house.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

BIGMAN: My father was in the United States in 1913.

LEVINE: I see.

BIGMAN: That's when he left the family with-with my grandfather.

LEVINE: What do you remember about your grandfather? Was your grandmother there, too?

BIGMAN: She was--she passed away when I was maybe three, four years old.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What do you remember about your mother's father?

BIGMAN: Well, as I said before, he was trading in the clothing material. Selling it, going from town to town with a--with a bundle on his back carrying it and selling it and then try to make a living that way.

LEVINE: Do you remember how he was with you? Do you remember his personality or anything about how he was?

BIGMAN: Oh, he was very, very great with me. He was--as far as being close and attentive to make sure that we had everything to eat and to take care, yes. Was very good that way.

LEVINE: How about your father's mother and father, did you know them?

BIGMAN: My father's mother passed away when I was--what I was told about when I was two or three weeks old. He didn't know his mother.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: Now, my--he--my grandfather, he was also trading with different things -- selling, going from town to town, selling pottery, selling farm equipment like hand tools, like sickles and all different things, saws for farmers. A tradesman.

LEVINE: What would he travel in? What kind of a traveling vehicle? What--

BIGMAN: Oh, horse and wagon.

LEVINE: [softly] A horse and wagon.

BIGMAN: Horse and wagon, that's what he used.

LEVINE: Would he be gone for periods of time? Would--would he--would he travel for periods of time?

BIGMAN: Yes, periodic. Yes, more or less during the summer months, of course -- the warm weather.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BIGMAN: In the winter they tried to prepare things, you know, for the occasion of having enough material and different things to sell.

LEVINE: Hmm. Wow. And how about aunts, uncles, cousins? Did you have a large extended family there?

BIGMAN: Did I have? Yeah, my mother had three brother-two brothers and two sisters. That's is three sis-- three girls and two boys. Well, they all had their own families. One of them remained in the town. The others were in different towns nearby. A brother was somewheres near Pinsk, which is a big city. Another one was in a city by the name of Sana, and another one was in Sdulin. Not Stalin, Sdulin.

LEVINE: S-T-

BIGMAN: S-D-U. S-D-U-L-I-N.

LEVINE: S-D-U-L-I-N? Uh-huh.

BIGMAN: Yeah, Sdulin.

LEVINE: And did you see-have contact with the-did you have contact with these family members?

BIGMAN: Yes. Yes. They used to more or less communicate by mail or periodic visits.

LEVINE: What would be an occasion? Were there occasions when the whole family got together?

BIGMAN: Oh, well, no, no. It-for the whole family getting together, had to be a big occasion. A wedding or something. Otherwise, it was just occasional visits.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember any weddings?

BIGMAN: I remember one wedding. One of my father's brothers married a cousin of my mother's and the wedding took place in our village. That was a big occasion.

LEVINE: Could you describe it in-

BIGMAN: A lot of the families, they got together. Yeah, they traveled.

LEVINE: Could you describe the wedding in-in as much detail as you remember it?

BIGMAN: Well, I can only remember as far as they -- they had a band of music which they called a klezmerl -- you know, klezmers?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: All right. Okay, and it was a big affair. You know, baking and cooking that all the women prepared. You know, they used to get together and-the whole village and get together and bake and cook and make sure it's a happy occasion. And the families came and when the families came from all the towns, they used to bring in a lot of the food with them.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: It was a happy occasion.

LEVINE: Wow. Now, was there a temple or a synagogue in town?

BIGMAN: We had a synagogue, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BIGMAN: We had a synagogue, very large one. For ladies, separate section --for Orthodox, more or less.

LEVINE: Hmm, and was the town--was there--were there Gentiles as well as Jewish people living in the town? Was--the town?

BIGMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Was the composition Jewish people and also--

BIGMAN: Yes, definitely.

LEVINE: It was?

BIGMAN: Yes. We had about I would say fifteen families Jewish and maybe around forty or fifty Gentile -- farming more or less. We also used to take sometimes--well, my mother used to lease--make a deal with a farmer. We used to supply, let's say, the potatoes. The farmers supplied the fertilizing of the ground and cultivate the ground. We used to go together, his family and our family, plant the potatoes between the two families. Come back later on in the season and harvest the potatoes. That I remember as a child we were doing it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: In order to get the potatoes for the season.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: And the potatoes used to be piled up in a heap, you know, covered up with soil to preserve it for a whole winter -- shouldn't freeze. And as you needed it, you took little at a time.

LEVINE: Was--was the potato one of the main foods that you remember eating then?

BIGMAN: Well, potatoes and then we had rye, wheat that we had to start from the scratch and grind it. Take it to the mill. We had one mill in town, and get the flour. Prepare the flour and bake it. Bake it for a whole week. They used to make one baking for the -- a whole week.

LEVINE: Hmm. But--so your mother did the baking in the--

BIGMAN: [Superposed] My mother did the baking. My mother did the baking---

LEVINE: in the oven that was the heating stove.

BIGMAN: -- preparing and everything and bake, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BIGMAN: Quite a procedure. Every family was in the manufacturing business or in the baking business.

LEVINE: Did people make their own clothes?

BIGMAN: Mostly, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BIGMAN: They used mainly from the linen that-a lot of the linen was made, homemade. They had a-they had a mill there. They-what you call them? a weaving press? They-you know, where they shoot through the spindles and they-

LEVINE: Oh, like a loom?

BIGMAN: Loom, you're right. Yeah. They had a loom. Every family, most of them had looms and in the winter they used to make the clo-- the material for the-. And if they wanted more fancier clothes, they had to buy the material, as I said before, from the tradesman..

LEVINE: Hmm, and can you think of what people did for enjoyment when you were growing up?

BIGMAN: Yeah, I'm trying to think was there such a thing.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BIGMAN: They used to get together, I remember in the springtime --- on the winter -- around a little bridge that we had in our town. Dance and sing. Make themselves happy.

LEVINE: What was the music? What were the instruments?

BIGMAN: Hmm, what were the instruments? Homemade whistles.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: Flutes. They used to take sometime the bark of a tree and take that off and cut little openings in that to control the air on it and make beautiful whistles and beautiful sounds. Yeah, real primitive living, huh?

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah.

BIGMAN: Oh, we used to go out also-in the wintertime we used to go out on the ice when it was frozen, chop a little opening. Make an opening in there and at night we used to bring out some little kerosene lamps or a candle in an enclosure like a lantern and put it right near the opening. The fish used to come out. We had sticks with nails in there, sharp nails. We used to just hit the fish and get them.

LEVINE: The fish would come up to the light?

BIGMAN: The light. When they saw the light, they used to come out for the light. So we used to get the fish.

LEVINE: [Laughs] Oh. And-

BIGMAN: That was sportsmanship. We used to get it as a sport, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BIGMAN: In the summer, we used to go with a homemade net in the water and catch the fish.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BIGMAN: Real primitive living.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: But we enjoyed it. It was nice, wholesome.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BIGMAN: Everything you ate or you drank was fresh. Fruit from the trees.

LEVINE: Did you have any livestock?

BIGMAN: Oh, yes. We had-we had cattle. We had horses. Practically every family had at least one cow to get your dairy products. You made your own-you made your own sour cream, buttermilk, butter. That's how we-that's way your life's came about.

LEVINE: What was the language you were speaking at home?

BIGMAN: We were speaking Jewish and-well, during the time really when I-you see, we had to learn, get our education more or less through a Jewish rabbi. Meaning a teacher, because if you tried in that area to get connected to a school, they will not accept you at that time. They will not accept the Jewish families. So all we could do is learn the Hebrew language, Jewish and the Russian language at that time through the teacher in our own schools, our own group.

LEVINE: What was it like? Could you describe the group where you learned? Where you went to learn? What-what was it like?

BIGMAN: Oh, we used to have ---

LEVINE: [Superposed] Was it in someone's home?

BIGMAN: it in a home. In the teacher's home, yes. He used to hold his classes during the day and in the evening at different hours teaching different things, and that's how we learned to read and write.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BIGMAN: And then again, you came home and you had to do your homework to make sure that you-you learned something about things. That's how we picked it up.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BIGMAN: We had no education like they have in the United States that we can go freely, enter into a school and learn. They barred you.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Was-was there anti-Semitism in your little town? Did you experience it?

BIGMAN: Well, there was plenty of it, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BIGMAN: It's not any worse-it was a little worse than it's now. I mean as far as in the United States, we don't feel it here. Over there we felt it.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BIGMAN: If you walked in the street, then they threw sticks at you sometimes, as if you don't belong there. Yet, as individuals you used to be meeting with them and you were friendly like, meeting your immediate neighbor. But certain times, they just got provoked for no good reason and they --- could be-not, not that you provoked them. Maybe they provoked from somewheres else, who knows.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Was-was there a feeling of fear? Did you have the feeling of fear in that town?

BIGMAN: As a kid, yes. Yup.

LEVINE: Now, how about medical care? You mentioned-

BIGMAN: No, there was no such-no. The only thing I remember there was we used to call them a felsher. It's a non-what you would call non-licensed doctor. Maybe he had just a permit to do that. He used to give-give us the vaccination, you know. He used to come to the town and just give everybody the vacci--- maybe he was just a licensed man for that purpose only. But we had no doctors in town.

LEVINE: What happened when your sister--your older sister became ill? Do you remember if she had any kind of treatment?

BIGMAN: I was--the town was--not only that town. That area right after the war, they -- it was swept with typhoid fever and every family practically went through with the typhoid fever. Whoever was lucky enough remained alive. It happened so with my sister, I was the one that was laid up with her at the same time with typhoid fever. Well, she got up one morning, you'll excuse me, to eliminate. And she got up, she says, "Mom, I don't feel well," and that was--that was the end of that.

LEVINE: But you survived typhoid fever? You survived typhoid fever then?

BIGMAN: I survived the typhoid fever, yes. Not only me, a lot of people survived and a lot of people passed away. I would say a good thirty, forty percent died.

LEVINE: Oh. Did--did you have any kind of treatment?

BIGMAN: No.

LEVINE: You just stayed in bed?

BIGMAN: No, it was just for family to family where they knew what to do at the time, that was it. There was no doctor.

LEVINE: Did they have folk kinds of medicine? Like did you take herbs or--

BIGMAN: Oh, yes. That we used to have, some homemade remedies. The only thing they had. For example, I had a sore under my arm. I don't remember right or left. My grandfather went to the woods and he got a frog. Somebody told him and they boiled the frog and they soaked rags, sanitary rags, you know, made up from--and they applied it and it helped. Whether that was the thing that helped or it was just cured by itself, I don't know, but it was--it was really a ve-- big mess.

LEVINE: Hmm. And for the typhoid fever, do you remember anything in particular that was done for you?

BIGMAN: Well, you r-- you run a high fever or high temperature, so they put on cold compresses to your head. Try to subdue the temperature a little bit. That was it. That's the way they did it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So you were--how old were you then, when you had the typhoid fever?

BIGMAN: I must have been about fourteen or fifteen.

LEVINE: And, let's see. So you were in school, from what age? When did you start learning with the rabbi?

BIGMAN: Well, we started the age of three or four.

LEVINE: Oh.

BIGMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And did you-were you continuing to learn up until you left? Did you continue?

BIGMAN: No, we were disrupted by the war. During the war days we, on and off. We were able to hold class or no class at all. But we always tried at home ourselves, each family or between families to try to help each other how to get advanced a little bit in reading and writing.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: The parent helped you. Grandparent. That's how we got by.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember anything personally about the First World War?

BIGMAN: About what?

LEVINE: The First World War?

BIGMAN: Well, I remember one morning we woke up, we heard shooting. We had a river near our home there. The Germans came in and they were throwing home gre- the hand grenades to wake everybody up. And then they more or less ransacked the town. For what reason, we don't know. Whatever they wanted, they took.

LEVINE: Did they take food? And is that what they-were they taking food? Or they were taking valuables?

BIGMAN: That is the first thing, yes. Well, of course, they-they were looking for food mainly to get, and then they were driven out.

LEVINE: By the town people? By who drove them?

BIGMAN: By the Russians at the time.

LEVINE: By the Russian Army, uh-huh.

BIGMAN: It was a battle forward and back.

LEVINE: So were you in hiding during that time or what did the town people do?

BIGMAN: Oh, no. We had to be in hiding more or less after the war when there became a lot of different parties there. The [unclear], the-- many more of them. They used to come to the town. They were worse than the Germans.

LEVINE: These were the Russian parties?

BIGMAN: That's when-that's when-no, no, not the Russian. The --

LEVINE: The Polish.

BIGMAN: Yeah, right. Well, they were breaking up in different parties. They used to come down to the town and really do a good job. Beat you up. Then we had to run to the woods to hide. That was the worst part.

LEVINE: In other words, different parties would beat up people who were of another party?

BIGMAN: Well, they came in, they wanted money. And if you didn't give them any money, they insisted, whether you had it or you didn't have it. You were in trouble. So if you don't give them the money, they just beat you up, and if you have money, they'll take the money and beat you up anyway. So, some people they even-they strung them up.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BIGMAN: Very, very rough.

LEVINE: So your father had been in the United States since 1913?

BIGMAN: 1913, right.

LEVINE: And why was it that-did you travel with the rest of your family when you came?

BIGMAN: Yes, we all came together.

LEVINE: Why was it that you came to this country at the particular time when-when you did?

BIGMAN: Well, until 1920, due to the fact that we had a war on, there was no way that my father could have possibly sent the-request the necessary papers to request the family to come to the United States.

LEVINE: Right.

BIGMAN: As soon as they opened up the possibilities of visas and everything, he sent the papers out and that was 1920 was the earliest that we could possibly get over.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember getting ready to leave? Prep-
preparing to leave?

BIGMAN: Well, we were so glad to get away from where we were, that it didn't matter. We just got whatever we could get together as quickly as possible and we were so happy about it to get out. Not happy to leave the family behind, the other families, but we were happy to get out of there to come back and get together with our father.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. When you were saying goodbye, did-did-did other families give you advice or give you some kind of wishes for the-coming to America or-

BIGMAN: Well, we didn't have many that were familiar with the United States, meaning that they were here and they came there. Well, I remember my teacher telling me, "Try to be a good man. Make sure you become a mensch." You know what a mensch ['good' man] is?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: Okay. That was the best advice he could have given me. That was the handshake from a rabbi, yeah, or a teacher. We didn't have a rabbi, if you mean the difference between a rabbi and a teacher.

LEVINE: You had a teacher.

BIGMAN: We had a teacher.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BIGMAN: A good teacher.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: When I say a good teacher, a man with his -- with sincerity. He made sure that you learned.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. It sounds as though you liked him.

BIGMAN: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Yeah. Uh-huh. Yeah.

BIGMAN: He made sure you liked him because he liked us. He used to take us swimming in the summer.

LEVINE: Do you remember his name?

BIGMAN: No.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BIGMAN: No.

LEVINE: So he took-

BIGMAN: It's a long time.

LEVINE: Yeah, that's quite alright. So it was the boys who were learning together. Were the girls learning with you or no?

BIGMAN: Ah, I think we had different classes. Different sessions.

LEVINE: What's your fondest memory of Europe? Do you have one that you think of sometimes?

BIGMAN: Well, we used to go in the summertimes. We used to have a lot of fun picking hazelnuts from trees. Did you ever try that?

LEVINE: No.

BIGMAN: There you go. I got a very big kick. You know, you had to—you had to shake the tree and the ripe nuts will fall down. And we used to carry big bags and pick them up, you know. And then we used to go into orchards and pick plums and apples and whatnot. That was a great life.

LEVINE: Was it pretty?

BIGMAN: Did you ever watch Tarzan climbing?

LEVINE: Did I ever watch what?

BIGMAN: Tarzan.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah. Sure.

BIGMAN: That was the kind of a life we had. In a smaller way.

LEVINE: [Laughs] Uh-huh. Do you remember it as a pretty place? Do you remember the village as a beautiful looking place?

BIGMAN: Well, it all depends which way you look. Well, let's say this. The main street consisted only maybe three or four homes and the synagogue was on one of the-next to the river there. In the center there was a big cross, big church. They had all the facilities. I mean between gentile and Jews, we had all the accommodations for your way of praying and-and we had good food there. I mean all fresh. We didn't have all the good things, but we had the -- all the wholesome things.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: Not the luxuries we have now.

LEVINE: No.

BIGMAN: It's a different life.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay, we're going to pause here, turn over the tape. We're going to stop and turn the tape over and then we'll resume.

END OF SIDE A]

[BEGIN

SIDE B]

LEVINE: Okay, we're now on Side Two of this tape and we're going to talk about leaving Duboy ----

BIGMAN: [Superposed] Duboy, yeah, okay.

LEVINE: ---- and traveling to the port.

BIGMAN: Well, we took a horse and wagon ride from Duboy and we went- we had it-there was what we called a little city or town, Plotnicha. [PH]

LEVINE: Can you spell that?

BIGMAN: Plotnicha. P-L-O-T, Plot, N-I-C-H-A. Plotnicha. All right?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: Okay. From Plotnicha we traveled to Stachow, [PH] another town, also by horse and wagon. Stachow.

LEVINE: S-T-O-

BIGMAN: S-T-A or O-C-H-O-W, Stachow. Stachow.

LEVINE: Okay.

BIGMAN: From Stachow, we took a rowboat and we went to the city of Pinsk. From Pinsk we took the railroad to Warsaw. In Warsaw we had to remain there for three months before we got our visa. When we did get our visa, we traveled to-the next step was Danzig. Danzig we had to go through the border between Poland and Germany. From Danzig we were on a train going to Berlin to Antwerp. In Antwerp we remained there for about a week or two and we went on the boat by the name of Lapland heading to the United States by making one stop in England. I skipped one thing. Can I?

LEVINE: Yes, go ahead.

BIGMAN: Ah, from Danzig we did not go by railroad. I think they put us on a boat for one day on the Baltic Sea and that's how we got to Antwerp.

LEVINE: Antwerp.

BIGMAN: Across the Baltic Sea on a boat one day.

LEVINE: Hmm. Well, what was it like? I mean you left a little village and-

BIGMAN: Well, that's what I said before. That everything was so different and something new to a village boy. Big cities. Coming to Pinsk was to be admired. Coming to Warsaw with the big beautiful buildings there at that time. It was a beautiful city. Spending three months there gave me a chance to look around. The first thing that I admired there, the most important where we stayed in one place, the buildings over there are enclosed with a courtyard with a steel gate. And you have buildings with entrances inside of the courtyard. In our courtyard, which was the-if I remember the city-the street or it's not

street. Nalivkes or something like that it was called. They had-they had a newspaper press in there and we used to watch the way the machinery worked at the time. The presses at that time, going back seventy-five years was very, very admirable.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BIGMAN: For a boy of sixteen, seventeen years old.

LEVINE: Right. So you were staying in one of these buildings. You stayed in a building with a courtyard.

BIGMAN: That's where we stayed, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BIGMAN: We used to stay-the one that had an apartment in those yar-- courtyards, or in the buildings; they used to rent out. We had to sleep on one bed, four boys and a mother. We had one bed. Across the bed. Maybe two feet away there was another family there and they had a big kitchen there that each family-excuse me-did the cooking.

LEVINE: Wow.

BIGMAN: Now there already we had to go downstairs to the little grocery store, buy the milk and the bread and everything else like-like over here already. In those days there were groceries, you know. You remember the pop and mom grocery?

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah.

BIGMAN: That was the way they had them there at that time.

LEVINE: Well, now, was your father able to send you money so you could make this long trip?

BIGMAN: Well, he had to-in order for us to get over to the United States, he had to send us money first. We had to - in order to get the visa, we had to declare that we had enough money to get over. First of all, he sent us prepaid already the-the boat ride.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: So all we needed was money to get over-from our town, our village to the point of embarkation on the boat.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. So when you left Warsaw, then you-then you traveled across the German border and you went to-

BIGMAN: We were-

LEVINE: Ended up in Belgium.

BIGMAN: Yeah, we were in Berlin for a couple of hours. Not to get off. We were just staying there with this train. And let's see, where are we? Then we went to Antwerp.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that city?

BIGMAN: Well, it was a beautiful-in fact, I visited Antwerp again eight or nine years ago, and I was in the same spot in the square I remember where we took the boat. I like that city very much, yes. The second time I enjoyed it more than the first time. I was more relaxed. I was more mature.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. Do you remember your mother, how she-

BIGMAN: My mother-

LEVINE: Thought about it? Fared during this whole trip?

BIGMAN: How she?

LEVINE: How-how she fared during this long trip with all her sons?

BIGMAN: Well, she was very happy to see her children get over here with her. She was a young woman yet at that time. I mean, she must have been about I would say forty, forty-five. So she was glad in one way to get away from there, but very unhappy because her family was left there. You know, very-there's greater cl-- closeness. Maybe at that time, I don't know, maybe it was different. At a time between fam-amongst the families than in the United States. It's not that far apart. In other words, there's a closer relationship there. You're like one family there. If you have a loaf of bread and the other one doesn't have it, they're going to get it. They're going to get half of it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So what do you remember about the Lapland? The ship?

BIGMAN: The Lapland, well, we were traveling in the third class, so it's not very pleasant. They gave you the food to survive. Which wasn't bad. And as far as anything else, there was no entertainment, if that's what you think of.

LEVINE: What were your accommodations like? Can you describe them?

BIGMAN: The what?

LEVINE: Can you describe what it was like for you in the third class on that ship?

BIGMAN: Not really. That I can't really-the sleeping accommodation was not very comfortable. That's one thing and as far as the food facilities, was one like a mess hall, you know. You sit down at tables and they just dished it out to you. You-it wasn't a-a first class situation.

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

BIGMAN: Well, I remember when it came in we were very thrilled to see the Statue of Liberty, especially at night. And then I remember my father going in a rowboat , coming over to the boat and they hoisted up some food for us.

LEVINE: Do you remember what he hoisted up?

BIGMAN: Well, they had to pull it up in with a rope, you know, and it was during the holiday time, so they sent some goodies over to keep his family alive. Yeah, we had a good time that way. And then we came to-to our uncle at 936 Sutter Avenue.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember anything about Ellis Island? Do you remember passing through here?

BIGMAN: Do I remember about Ellis Island? Well, I remember sleeping over several nights there on the floor. Am I right?

LEVINE: Well, why? Do you know why you were staying over?

BIGMAN: I don't know. They were because it was-it was very crowded. Many ships came in at the same time and they had to take one ship at a time before they can let all the people go through. It was a very high time of the season, it seems.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: And it took us several days before we got through. Not because of any-just for our next we had to wait.

LEVINE: There wasn't any problem with sickness or-

BIGMAN: No, no. We had no problems.

LEVINE: Papers or-

BIGMAN: Physical problems -- no, none.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: No.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the examinations here?

BIGMAN: I remember doctors just checking you out. But we went through and then the first thing we knew, we were greeted by our father, once we were released. And from there on he took a cab and we went home. That was the start of the United States.

LEVINE: Can you remember some first impressions? Can you remember some first impressions, either at Ellis Island or when your father took you to Sutter Avenue?

BIGMAN: Well, we were glad to—we were glad to get out of Ellis Island and get away and get back to where we were heading for. Get to the point where we were heading for.

LEVINE: Do you remember the place where you lived first on Sutter Avenue?

BIGMAN: I certainly do.

LEVINE: Could you describe that?

BIGMAN: Well, my uncle owned a -- that building, which is a--was a two-family house. And my father had one room at the time, but we came in there just to stay over until we get an apartment. It was very hard to get apartments at that time. Then a few weeks, my father got an apartment and we moved away from there in our own unit.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Can you compare the living when you first came to Brooklyn, compared with what you left when you were in Europe?

BIGMAN: The difference?

LEVINE: Yeah.

BIGMAN: Well, it was a complete strange transformation. It was like from one world to another. But when you go from one place and you come to a place that's better, you get very quickly accustomed to it. We liked it.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember what--what you became accustomed to? What it was that you liked about here and how you--you adjusted to this new kind of life here?

BIGMAN: Well, as chil--as youngsters we liked everything that came in our way. We didn't miss anything. We had bread. We had better food and then we started to go to school.

LEVINE: What was that like for you in the beginning?

BIGMAN: We were very, very glad to get some education, to get the English language learned. Yup.

LEVINE: Were there a lot of immigrant children in your class in school when you first started?

BIGMAN: Quite a few. Classes and classes of immigrants. We used to go--no, we went to the evening school right away. You know, at the age of sixteen.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

BIGMAN: I was already out of the elementary school and so we went to the evening classes and we had to go to work.

LEVINE: What did you-did you work soon after you got here? Did you start work soon after you came to this country?

BIGMAN: Right after, yeah. Yeah. My father was not a wealthy man. We had to go to work right away, sure. Yup. Yup, the oldest brother and myself. The two youngest brothers, they went to school. They were still in school.

LEVINE: So what kind of jobs did you get?

BL: The first job I had was my father got me into the work as a grocery clerk, delivery boy. That was the first job. Then I went to work to millinery, making ladies hats, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: I worked there for about a year and a half, and from there on I-at that time I told my father I would like to enter the building trade instead. So he got me a job to be electrician and I went to work in the electrical field and that's where I got my background.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BIGMAN: And I stuck to it ever since. Now my-the boy that you met, Danny, he's an electrical engineer. My youngest son is running the business that I started, also electrical business.

LEVINE: Was this in Brooklyn? Did you stay in-did you stay in Brooklyn?

BIGMAN: I stayed in Brooklyn, but now my-the business that the youngest son took over is in Long Island City.

LEVINE: So what did you do, you studied and you took an elec-you took electrician tests and-

BIGMAN: I-no, I-I practiced the electrical field in a practical way and I also studied at night, as much as I could. Took up different courses. For a while I went to Baron DeHirsch School. At that time we had-I don't know if you heard of it or not. There they gave you some practical experience and theoretical at the same time. Then I took up different courses, otherwise, which we call applied electricity. And between learning the trade in a practical way and theoretically and reading books and all that, you learn, you get your way around. If you want to do it, you can do it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: You have to have the ambition.

LEVINE: Do you know where you got your ambition from?

BIGMAN: There's one thing-where?

LEVINE: Where did you get your ambition from?

BIGMAN: Where did I get it?

LEVINE: Yeah.

BIGMAN: My grandfather, when I was-what would I say, ten years old? You know, he used to carry the bundles on his back to go from town to town. He used to ask me, "Do you want to come with me?" He used to take me, put a little bundle to make me feel happy and I went with him. Yeah, and helping my mother selling different things. That's how you learn, and making things. You get around and you learn your own way. You got to have the ambition.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: You say where do you get the ambition. I think you have to be born a little bit with it, an impulse thing it has to be in you in order to get-I think that's-my oldest son is very, very ambitious. Very ambitious.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So how did you meet your wife?

BIGMAN: Ah, that's a beautiful story.

LEVINE: Well, good.

BIGMAN: Well, I went for a weekend on Labor Day weekend to a small hotel in the Catskill Mountains. Did you ever hear of the Catskill Mountains? And there I was on the second floor. I wake up in the morning and it looks like a beautiful day and I open up the window to look out to see the sunshine and there I see a beautiful girl walking out from a kitchen door. And I say, "Good morning" and the girl lifts up her head and she says, "Good morning," with a big smile. And I met her for breakfast downstairs and then I met her again outside. We were talking and talking and talking and there it was. I said, "There's my girl."

LEVINE: How old were you then?

BIGMAN: How long?

LEVINE: How old were you about?

BIGMAN: I was twenty-seven.

LEVINE: Oh, so you had been here for ten years.

BIGMAN: I was here seven years, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Uh-huh.

BIGMAN: And she came 1921. I never knew her from before, meaning from the old country, but she was-she came here when she was eight years

old. And it happened so that she-her father was affiliated in the hotel partly, in the facilities there. So she came for a weekend to see her father and that's how I met her. From there on we dated in Brooklyn for quite a while, for a couple of years and then we decided to get married. You know the old story. You keep company, then you get married. The result, children come.

JL; Well, tell me your wife's name and maiden name.

BIGMAN: Her name was Bella Lieberman. In the old country it was Globerman. She came here 1921.

LEVINE: Actually, maybe you can mention how-how you changed your name from Beigel to Bigman.

BIGMAN: Yes. When my father came to the United States, his uncle originally came before him. And when his uncle came and he arrived in Staten Island-Ellis Island, mistake -- In Ellis Island the man that was registering him said, "You know, you'll have a hard time with a name the way you're spelling it." How he spell it, I don't know. I wasn't there. He said, "Make your name Bigman." That was in Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BIGMAN: And since my uncle decided to have his Bigman, or had his name Bigman, my father accepted or adopted that name. When we came here, it was automatically changed when they send the papers over from Beigel to Bigman.

LEVINE: And how about your wife? They changed their name, too.

BIGMAN: Globerman, well, I wasn't there at the time of that, but he- from her father had a cousin here who has changed his name. I believe that's the way it went about -- that his name was also Globerman, but he changed it to Lieberman. So when my father in law came here, he changed his name to Lieberman from Globerman.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So the children that you had, can you name your children?

BIGMAN: The children?

LEVINE: Your children, yeah.

BIGMAN: My children?

LEVINE: Yes.

BIGMAN: Yes, the oldest son is Daniel Bigman. The daughter is Sandra Margolis, right now -- changed her name. And Stefan Bigman. Three children.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and you have grandchildren.

BIGMAN: Oh, my God, you want the names of the grandchildren? My grandchildren, the daughter's grandchildren Gary, Nanette and Leonard. You want the great grandchildren?

LEVINE: [Laughs] Well, I know your son Danny and your grandson Noel are here today.

BIGMAN: Yeah. Well, I should-I missed Danny. Danny and how about the wives, no?

LEVINE: Okay.

BIGMAN: Danny is married to a girl by the name of Marlene and I have a grandson by the name of Noel, Danny's son. Granddaughter Allison, Danny's daughter. Sandra Margolis, as I said before, has three children, Gary, Nanette and Leonard. My youngest son, Stefan, has three sons, Michael, Scott and Jason. Now, start with the great grandchildren?

LEVINE: How many great grandchildren do you have?

BIGMAN: I have seven.

LEVINE: [Laughs] Okay, well-

BIGMAN: Wait a minute. Am I- I'm lost -- eight!

LEVINE: Okay, but we-we don't have too much time left, so I'd like to ask you a couple of more questions.

BIGMAN: All right. Go ahead.

LEVINE: When you think back about coming here as a young man sixteen years old, nearly seventeen, and you think about starting life over again in this new country, how do you think about it now? Now that you've lived out most of your life here?

BIGMAN: You mean what would I do if I would be coming here now at the same age? Well, I would have liked in my life to study more. I would have loved that. To go through more professionally, which I feel that I missed it. The reason I missed it really is-I did try when I first came to the United States. I went to a prep school, trying to get myself advanced. But when I entered the electrical field, the work was so hard working a whole day long that I found out that I cannot go to school. But I can only study at home. So that's how I started to pick up is at home and-but if I would do it all over again, I would maybe try a little harder to go through what I -- my intentions were originally.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and what do you feel very satisfied about that you've done in your life?

BIGMAN: In the United States?

LEVINE: Any time.

BIGMAN: What -- my life accomplishment?

LEVINE: Yes.

BIGMAN: I feel that I've done in a very honest sincere way, in a very nice way. I was always contented because I loved the field that I was in. I still like it. Right now that I'm in New York City, I go into my youngest son's place and I still tinker around with certain things because I love it. I like the field. It's very, very knowledgeable and very interesting at all times.

LEVINE: How did you know that that was the field you wanted to go in to? Do you remember?

BIGMAN: Well, I remember-you mean how did I know?

LEVINE: Yeah.

BIGMAN: Well, as I said before, I mentioned before, I had other jobs. When I worked in the millenary place, I was making thirty some odd dollars a week, which was high pay at that time. And when my father got me a job to go in the electrical field, I started with twelve dollars a week. My boss from the millenary shop, when I told him that I'm quitting, he says, "Are you out of your mind? You're earning good pay. You're going to leave the job and go in-" I told him, "Look, I don't like to sit on my," excuse me, "-- and just keep on doing what I'm doing." I say, "I want this to work a little bit." And I quit -- in a very nice way. But that was my ambition. I felt I must go to something that's more interesting, not only to make a dollar. I never cared for this here ---- meaning you need it, but something to learn is more important.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And how is this time in your life, now that you're children are grown and you don't have to work?

BIGMAN: I'm very contented. The only thing is what I miss is my little girl that passed away. I miss her very much. It's only a year and a half.

LEVINE: Oh. Yeah.

BIGMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay, well, is there anything else you would like to say before we close relevant to coming to this country and-

BIGMAN: Well, as I said, I feel that I have done everything I possibly could have done -- the way I did start in every way with the hardship I started because my father was a very poor man (and by the way, he was-a year after we were in the United States, my father took very sick and he was sick for eighteen years before he passed away). So actually these four brothers had to pull together in order to keep everything going and that's what we did.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember any attitudes your mother and father had that you tried to pass along to your children?

BIGMAN: Well, they always preached, "Try to be good to people. Do the right thing in an honest way." That was the main thing that I-they kept on telling us. Not to do anything-any bad thing. Trying to keep the-years back, that's how they brought up a families -- trying to put the kids on the right track all the time.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BIGMAN: You know what I'm talking about. These days it's something, different world.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, I want to thank you so much for a most wonderful interview.

BIGMAN: Well, I'm glad. I hope I was-I'm glad I was helpful.

LEVINE: You were and I've been speaking with Morris Bigman, who came from what was Poland in 1920. He was sixteen years of age and he's now ninety-two. This is September 29th, 1996 and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service here at Ellis Island and I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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