

EI-819

SAMUEL CANTER

BIRTHDATE: FEBRUARY 12, 1893

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

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RUSSIA, 1901

AGE: 8

SHIP:

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

- **RUSSIA:**
- **US: LONGMEADOW, MA**

SIGRIST: My name is Paul Sigrist and I work for the National Park Service.

CANTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Which is part of the federal government. Today is Friday, October 11th, 1996 and I'm here at the Jewish Nursing Home in Long Meadow. That's where we are.

CANTER: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: And I'm here with Mr. Sam Canter, C-A-N-T-E-R.

EI-819/CANTER

CANTER: Right.

SIGRIST: Mr. Canter, what country did you come from?

CANTER: [unclear] Russia.

SIGRIST: It was Russia and do you remember what year you came?

CANTER: 1900.

SIGRIST: You came in 1900. And how old were you at that time?

CANTER: That I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Do you know what your birthday is?

CANTER: February 12th, 1893.

SIGRIST: February 12th, 1893 and you think you came in 1900.

CANTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Can you say the name of the town again Russia where you were born?

CANTER: Motley.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

CANTER: Motley? M-O-T-L-E-Y, I think.

EI-819/CANTER

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What do you remember about the town that you lived in when you were a little boy?

CANTER: Well, I couldn't remember very much. Only thing is—[clears throat]—if you needed water, you had to go to the well to get it. If you needed light, you had kerosene lamps. My mother always baked her own bread, made our flour even. She used to [unclear].

SIGRIST: [unclear]

CANTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You're making a gesture that you're pounding.

CANTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

CANTER: And what else? What else?

SIGRIST: Can you describe the house, what the house looked like that you lived in when you were a little boy?

CANTER: Well, there was about four, five of us living in one room.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What was the house made out of?

CANTER: Wood. Wood.

SIGRIST: It was made out of wood, and how many rooms did it have?

EI-819/CANTER

CANTER: One big room.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh, how did you—

CANTER: We slept there. We ate there. After cleaning it all up, slept and ate and everything else and we slept on the—on the oven. We had an oven, down like a baker's oven now. We slept on the top of it. On top of the oven. Where we got the air, I don't know. Used to paste the windows up.

SIGRIST: Paste the windows?

CANTER: Paste the windows so now air would come in. When I came to America, I told my mother, "Open the windows." I said to my—my mother was here before I was.

SIGRIST: What was the weather like in Russia at that time?

CANTER: Cold.

SIGRIST: Do you remember snow in Russia?

CANTER: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Is there a story you have about the snow once?

CANTER: Yeah. Huh?

SIGRIST: Do you have a story that you can tell me about when it—when you had a lot of snow when you were a kid?

EI-819/CANTER

CANTER: Oh, we had a lot of—we [unclear]. There was so much snow there that you could hardly see the heads of the people walk by at that time.

SIGRIST: What kind of food did people eat in Russia then?

CANTER: Bread, klebba. [PH]

SIGRIST: What's klebba?

CANTER: Bread.

SIGRIST: That's bread, uh-huh.

CANTER: We had bread to go with anything we had. Like we had—my mother made her own butter. We had a cow.

SIGRIST: Who milked the cow?

CANTER: My mother.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Did the cow have a name?

CANTER: Betsy.

SIGRIST: Betsy?

CANTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. You said you ate bread. What other foods did you eat?

EI-819/CANTER

CANTER: Well, we had meat on Friday and Saturday. My mother used to kill a chicken. We had chickens. So we used to go down to the slaughter. Jewish people can't kill their own meat. They have to go down, they call it a shokka [PH], to get the meat ready to eat. I mean, he inspects the meat. He looks at it. He can tell in the eyes where the animal is sick or not. The animal is sick, he condemns the [unclear].

SIGRIST: I see, so if the animal is sick, they won't kill it.

CANTER: They won't kill it.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What special way does he kill the animal?

CANTER: Well, the only they could—I could remember was ringing their neck. They weren't any—they wouldn't waste a knife.

SIGRIST: What did you do when you were a little boy for fun in Russia? How would you have fun?

CANTER: We had no fun. What fun we had, we were lucky we had bread.

SIGRIST: What—what was your father's name?

CANTER: What?

SIGRIST: Your father's name.

CANTER: Lazer.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

CANTER: Huh?

SIGRIST: How do you spell that?

CANTER: L-A-Z-E-R.

SIGRIST: And what did he do for a living?

CANTER: He was a—oh, not a carpenter, but a—he used to make bricks.

SIGRIST: He was a brick maker.

CANTER: Make, you know, in those days they used to make bricks. You'd hire a peasant or goyem, non-Jews for so much a year. You didn't pay them a week, and they worked all their life. [someone speaking on intercom in background]. For maybe a dollar a week. Didn't pay much money.

SIGRIST: Is that—is that how your father supported the family?

CANTER: No, my father came to America.

SIGRIST: How old were you when he came to America?

CANTER: My father went himself, then he sent for us.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see. How long did he go before he sent for you?

CANTER: About a year.

SIGRIST: He was here about a year before. Where did he go in America?

CANTER: New York.

SIGRIST: And what did—

CANTER: Nyork.

SIGRIST: In—in—in where?

CANTER: The used to call it Nyork.

SIGRIST: Nyork, oh, I see.

CANTER: The Jews called it Nyork instead of New York.

SIGRIST: I see.

CANTER: They couldn't pronounce the whole—the whole thing, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you know what work he got when he went to New York?

CANTER: Yeah, he was a—used to make bricks.

SIGRIST: He made bricks in this country?

CANTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Too. Oh, I see.

CANTER: And he made him. No, he was a short time making bricks in America. He wrote to my mother at that time, "In America"—[clears throat]—

SIGRIST: Take your time.

CANTER: You can't make bricks like they do there. "In America they make more bricks in a day than I made in a lifetime." [Coughs]

SIGRIST: Are you okay? You want a glass of water?

CANTER: No, it's all right.

SIGRIST: Okay. Well, so what did he get for work then, when he stopped making bricks in America? Do you remember what job he got?

CANTER: In America? Oh, he get about three dollars a week, three and a half dollars a week. Didn't get much.

SIGRIST: But what was he doing?

CANTER: He was mixing mortar because he was a brick maker in the old country, so he—he got so he was mixing mortar by machine in America.

SIGRIST: I see. When you were a little boy in Russia, what did you know about America?

CANTER: I know it's a wonderful country. They all talked about it when I was a young—America the Great. Wonderful. How everything is wonderful here, and I found out it was right.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. When you were growing up in Russia, what language did you speak at home?

CANTER: Yiddish.

SIGRIST: You spoke Yiddish.

CANTER: [Coughs]

SIGRIST: And how did you practice your religion at home?

CANTER: My mother was a very Orthodox Jew, Jewish woman. So we had to go to synagogue every Saturday, make sure. Three times on Saturday and two, three times every day because my mother was very religious.

SIGRIST: Could your mother read and write?

CANTER: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Yes.

CANTER: My mother was about the only woman that she used to write letters to the—to the husbands in America for the wives because they couldn't read.

SIGRIST: So a lot—

CANTER: They couldn't write.

SIGRIST: A lot of husbands went to America and left their wives in Europe.

CANTER: Yeah, that's right.

SIGRIST: I see. What was your mother's name?

CANTER: Pescha [PH].

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

CANTER: Pauline.

SIGRIST: Pauline, but how do you spell Pescha?

CANTER: I forget now, if I know.

SIGRIST: Do you know what her—her maiden name was before she married, her last name?

CANTER: Pomrantz [PH].

SIGRIST: Pomrantz.

CANTER: P-O-M-R-A-N-T-Z.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

CANTER: Because I came to America under that name.

SIGRIST: You came—oh, that's interesting. Why—why did you come to America under that name?

CANTER: Because her cousin brought me and in those days they used to make up families. Like I—I had a cousin and that cousin had two boys and a girl. He'd take two boys and a girl, bring them to America.

SIGRIST: As if they were his own children?

CANTER: That's right. That's the only way you could get to America, you go in with somebody.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's—that's very interesting. [someone speaking on intercom in background] How did you spell that? P-O-M—Pomrantz.

CANTER: P-O-M-R-A-N-T-Z.

SIGRIST: Okay.

CANTER: That was her maiden name.

SIGRIST: That was her maiden name, but that was the name that you assumed when you came to this country.

CANTER: That's right. That's right.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about is there a prayer that you remember learning as a child in Yiddish or Hebrew?

CANTER: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: A prayer that your mother taught you?

CANTER: Besides my mother taught, what she taught me, she was an educated woman. I went to what they call a Yaida [PH]. That's a Hebrew day school.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Is there a prayer that you could say for me on tape that you learned as a child?

CANTER: Well, one prayer is you say a prayer [speaks in Yiddish]. That's a prayer for bread.

SIGRIST: I see. Unfortunately, there's something going on outside. I can hear all this noise. I hope it's not picking up on tape. Was that a prayer that you would say before dinner?

CANTER: Yeah, that's the prayer. [speaks Yiddish] Say a prayer that give your bread. That give your bread. That covers the whole table, whatever you eat, cake, desserts or anything.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you remember what you packed to take to America?

CANTER: What?

SIGRIST: What did you—what did you take with you from Russia to America?

CANTER: I didn't have very much to take.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what it was though, what you did take?

CANTER: I didn't. Lucky I had clothes on my back.

SIGRIST: Did you want to go to America?

CANTER: Oh, yes. We were all looking forward to going to America.

SIGRIST: Were—did you have brothers and sisters? [intercom]

CANTER: I had one sister and one brother.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh, where they—how did you fall in there? Were they older, younger?

CANTER: I was the second one. My sister was the first one.

SIGRIST: So you're the middle child of three.

CANTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. But you said that you went with a cousin.

CANTER: To America.

SIGRIST: To America. How—did your mother go to America?

CANTER: No, she—my mother went first.

SIGRIST: She was here.

CANTER: My father went first and he sent—after he saved up a little money, he sent for my—my mother. Then my mother went to work in a sweat shop and she earned some money and sent for us.

SIGRIST: I see. So when your mother got to America—

CANTER: She went to work.

SIGRIST: She worked in a sweat shop.

CANTER: Yeah, working in a—sewing buttons. She used to talk about it.

SIGRIST: What did she used to—

CANTER: Sew buttons on jackets, coats.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. [intercom] When she went to America, whom did you live with?

CANTER: My grandmother.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What do you remember about your grandmother?

CANTER: All I could remember, my grandmother was just like a second mother to me. She was a good person. She saw that I ate and saw that I kept clean. I could remember one thing that I'm still remembering. I was going to the synagogue in the morning on Saturday morning and I was dressed up, but my face wasn't so clean. So my grandmother stopped at a puddle. You know what a puddle is? A puddle of water.

SIGRIST: Oh, a puddle of water. Yes.

CANTER: And she washed my face in the water, and she took her petticoat and washed it. That I remember.

SIGRIST: She wanted you to be clean.

CANTER: That's right.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Whose mother was she?

CANTER: My—my wife. My—

SIGRIST: Mother, your mother's mother?

CANTER: Mother's mother.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. So the cousin that you came to America with—

CANTER: His name was Lipshitz.

SIGRIST: Lipshitz.

CANTER: Lip-shitz.

SIGRIST: And—can you spell that?

CANTER: Who in the hell knows.

SIGRIST: Okay, all right.

CANTER: I'm lucky I spell my own name.

SIGRIST: Well, you're doing—you're doing well so far. Why was he going to America?

CANTER: Because her husband was there. He went first. Naturally, she had to go to her husband.

SIGRIST: I see.

EI-819/CANTER

CANTER: And he'd send her money so to come to America. Then after my mother come to America, she went to work in a sweat shop for about three dollars a week and sent for us kids after she saved enough money.

SIGRIST: Did all three of you children go under the name of Pomrantz when you came to America?

CANTER: No. We went on the name of Barsofsky, B-A-R-S-O-F-S-K-Y.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

CANTER: Barsofsky. Russian name.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Where did you go to get onto the ship?

CANTER: We went to a place they called Pinsk.

SIGRIST: You went to Pinsk.

CANTER: Huh?

SIGRIST: You went to Pinsk.

CANTER: And there we took—we took a train and after we got off of the train we took a boat.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

CANTER: To America.

EI-819/CANTER

SIGRIST: Do you remember where that boat left from?

CANTER: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Don't.

CANTER: Too young.

SIGRIST: Do you remember—do you remember the name of the boat?

CANTER: Ah, how could I remember?

SIGRIST: Okay.

CANTER: I—I lucky I know my own name.

SIGRIST: All right. Do you have any memories of being on the ship? Being on the boat?

CANTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about being on the boat?

CANTER: Well, they fed you which is something that I never had. They fed you good. When it came to—we were in an American boat. You know what they used to give us? Herring. Potatoes and herring. Potatoes and herring used to come out of my ears. [Coughs]

SIGRIST: So that's all they fed you was potatoes and herring?

CANTER: Well, every day. Every day, Shabbaz [PH] you had a Saturday meal, you know. [unclear] Saturday. That's like your mother cooked. That's all I—they had what they called school.

SIGRIST: Scholt.

CANTER: Scholt. You know, scholt. They used to set a whole—they used to set—how the hell can I explain it? They used to set—make up a big—a big what you call dish and they put it in the oven on Friday and so they cook it up. All night long it would cook and that contained meat. You find a piece of meat, you were lucky. Meat and potatoes, floyman [PH]. Floyman is a—you know what floyman is?

SIGRIST: No.

CANTER: Plums like.

SIGRIST: Plums?

CANTER: Dried plums. They used to dry them and use them in the winter.

SIGRIST: And—and so this was so the women didn't have to cook on Saturdays?

CANTER: No, on Saturday we didn't cook. We cooked on Friday.

SIGRIST: I see, so the food was all ready then for you on Saturday.

CANTER: My—my mother made it read on Friday.

EI-819/CANTER

SIGRIST: I see. I see. Do you know how long it took for the ship to get to New York?

CANTER: About three weeks.

SIGRIST: Three weeks. Does anything else stick out in your mind about being on the ship?

CANTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where—where did you sleep on the ship?

CANTER: There was a lot of people sleeping. There were shelves. A shelf like, first and second. My uncle used to travel a lot. He brought us to America, my—an uncle of mine. So the only way he brought us, he told us before we got on the boat “Try to grab the top floor, the top bunk.”

SIGRIST: The top bunk.

CANTER: “Because if you don’t, somebody will pee pee or do other things. They’ll do it on you from the other floor,” because a lot of them didn’t know.

SIGRIST: That was good advice.

CANTER: Yeah, so we took the top floor.

SIGRIST: Did—did you all stay in—in one room? Were you all together?

CANTER: Who went over? I came with a cousin.

SIGRIST: I know, but—but your uncle—

CANTER: They were all together.

SIGRIST: You were all together, uh-huh.

CANTER: Cousins and uncles and—

SIGRIST: Did you get sick on the ship?

CANTER: Oh, yes. Threw up.

SIGRIST: Do you—did you ever get a chance to go on the deck of the ship?

CANTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you see when you were up on the deck?

CANTER: The water, that's all. Plenty of water. And boy, were we glad when we—when we got to America. [intercom]

SIGRIST: So it took three weeks. It took three weeks to get to New York about.

CANTER: All of—all of the three weeks.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What do you remember about when the ship arrived in New York?

CANTER: I met my mother. My mother met me at the boat.

EI-819/CANTER

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Did you have to go to Ellis Island?

CANTER: Yeah, that's where we went, through Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

CANTER: What the hell could I remember? It was a nice place. To me they gave you herring and bread, that was food in those days. We ate. That's all.

SIGRIST: So your mother picked you up. She—she met you.

CANTER: Yeah, and she worked in a sweat shop making about probably three, four dollars a week.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Did you—do you remember having to be examined? Medically examined?

CANTER: Oh, yeah, they examine your eyes before they let you in and if you don't pass, they send you back. They used to examine your eyes, your hair. In your head, the bugs or what.

SIGRIST: That's right. Where did your mother take you after she met you at Ellis Island?

CANTER: New York City.

SIGRIST: Where was she living at that time?

CANTER: Rutgers Street.

SIGRIST: Rutger Street.

CANTER: Rutger. Rutger Street in the East side near the river.

SIGRIST: On the [unclear] side. Uh-huh.

CANTER: New Cherry Street.

SIGRIST: Yup. Can you describe for me the apartment that she was living in?

CANTER: Yeah, beautiful apartment. We had one room, about six people slept in it. Slept on the floor. That was—you used to do other things in it and during the night, we used to make the beds on the floor. Americans never knew what good things they had. They had beds. [unclear] in Europe.

SIGRIST: In the apartment that—that you went to live in, did you have electricity in the apartment?

CANTER: Oh, no.

SIGRIST: How did you light the apartment in America?

CANTER: Kerosene. [phone ringing in background]

SIGRIST: Kerosene lamps.

CANTER: Used to go and buy two, three cents worth of kerosene.

SIGRIST: Did they put you into school when you first got here?

CANTER: That's the trouble, they didn't. Truant officer got me two, three times.

SIGRIST: What did you do instead of going to school?

CANTER: Peddle papers. Sell newspapers, pick up junk. Anything to make a penny.

SIGRIST: And what did you do with the money that you earned?

CANTER: Bought bread. [unclear] bagels. Those days they had bagels. You know what a bagel is?

SIGRIST: Yes.

CANTER: That's what I used to buy.

SIGRIST: Yup.

CANTER: I earned a couple pennies, I'd buy one bagel. One.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about how it was to learn English?

CANTER: On the street you learn everything. There was nothing to it, to learn English when you came to America. You didn't have to go to school. You—the kids taught you, one kid to another.

SIGRIST: What about your parents, could they speak English?

CANTER: No. How could they?

SIGRIST: Did they try to learn?

CANTER: Oh, yes, my mother did afterwards. She went to school. That's— that's my mother.

SIGRIST: What about your father?

CANTER: My father I never knew. He died before I—when I got to America, he was dead already.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see. So you just lived with your mother then when you got here?

CANTER: That's right.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Do you remember how—how long of a day your mother worked in the sweat shops?

CANTER: Ten—ten—ten, at least ten, eleven hours. She used to get up in the morning. Early in the morning when God was asleep, she used to say in those days. Get up in the morning and work to work and where my mother worked was on Montgomery Street, a factory. She used to sew in buttons for four and a half dollars a week.

SIGRIST: Did she ever bring work home to work on?

CANTER: Yes, she did. Sewing buttons.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you sold newspapers and things. What was your first official job that you got?

CANTER: Pick up junk, junk on the street and buy something to eat.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go into get a factory job?

CANTER: A what?

SIGRIST: Did you ever get a factory job in New York? A factory job like a sweatshop job?

CANTER: Yeah. They pay nothing. Two dollars a week I used to get. Fifty-nine hours, two dollars.

SIGRIST: Did you become a citizen?

CANTER: Oh, sure.

SIGRIST: Yes. How old were you when you became a citizen?

CANTER: Well, I was—my—in those days I didn't have to, my—my father did. When you come to America you said you two, three, children or whatever you had and you gave their names and you become a citizen.

SIGRIST: Were—were Jewish people in America treated any differently than they had been treated in Russia?

CANTER: Oh, sure. That's why they came to America. Why do you suppose I'm here?

SIGRIST: Well, I'm just wondering what—what the difference was.

CANTER: Well, in—in Russia they'd address you as "gid." [PH]You know what gid is? Jew. That's your name. No name, Sam. Jew. That's Russia

and I was so glad that I came to America. Nothing like America. When you came to America, they all respected you and everybody was alike. You went to school. Everything was, you know, like it should be. Like it is now.

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different had you stayed in Russia?

CANTER: I would have been dead. I—I never—that's one thing I never liked in Russia. That's why I'm here. My mother came here. My father came here. That's the craziest world over in Russia that time.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm.

CANTER: I don't know how it is now.

SIGRIST: Well, Mr. Canter, thank you very much. You've answered all my questions. You did a great job.

CANTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I appreciate you letting me ask you these questions. Do you have any final thing you'd like to say?

CANTER: The only thing I'd like to say is one thing.

SIGRIST: What?

CANTER: God bless America and me in it.

SIGRIST: Thank you very much.

CANTER: And all the people because when I came to America, you know, things were very tough in Europe. A Jew—especially for the Jews, but when I came to America I never thought that anything could be so good. I—I was walking on the street and a couple guys caught me, they tried to beat me up. Well, about four, five Jewish kids got a hold of those kids that beat me up, non-Jews, and beat them up because we were the majority. A lot of Jews came from Europe and the Jews in Europe, some of them didn't know how to fight back, but after awhile they got so they knew how to, in order to protect themselves, fight back. And they did. They used to call the Jews "gid." Anybody'd call you "gid," the other Jews, they didn't—they didn't want to be called by name "gid." They want to be called by name. Like my name is Sam, that's what they want me to use. They want the people to call me that name. That's America not Europe.

SIGRIST: Okay, good. Mr. Canter, thank you very much. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Sam Canter on Friday, October 11th, 1996.

CANTER: Know something else?

SIGRIST: What?

CANTER: I have two [unclear] sons and both has got wonderful jobs. One is a professor. That's America. In Boston College and with the other one, had a big job, Springfield College. In education, both of them, both of my sons. They have children. I have grandchildren with them. They were very good.

SIGRIST: Great. I hope they enjoy—I'm going to send you a copy of this tape, so I hope they enjoy listening to this interview.

CANTER: Well, it's—it—I want to tell you something. Another thing like America.

SIGRIST: Good.

CANTER: I want my children to know what a good country we're in and they made a—I made a good choice that time.

SIGRIST: Yes, you did. Thank you very much, sir.

[END OF INTERVIEW]