EI-887
BORIS SPIVAK
BIRTHDATE: MAY 15, 1903
INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 20, 1997
RUNNING TIME: 59:31
INTERVIEWER: ROGER HERZ
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THE UKRAINE, 1923
AGE 20
SHIP RECALLED AS "THE EMBIRIKOS," PROBABLE PASSAGE ON "THE BYRON"

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: A mechanical sound can be heard throughout the recording. Mr. Spivak incorrectly states the year of his birth as 1904 at the beginning of the interview. The correct year is 1903. Mr. Spivak is the brother-in-law of Dinah Antonoff, EI-888.

Roger Herz, volunteer interviewer, Ellis Island Oral History Project,
5/30/1997.

HERZ: Good morning. This is Roger Herz for the National Park Service. Today is May the 20th, 1997 and I'm at Ellis Island with Boris Spivak, who was twenty years old when he came in from the Ukraine. Mr. Spivak, why don't we start out by just giving me your full name and your date of birth, please.

SPIVAK: My full name is Boris Spivak and my date of birth is May the 15th, 1904. [sic, 1903]

HERZ: And where were you born?

SPIVAK: I was born in a small town in the Ukraine, by the name of Pietigora [ph]. Five, five hills.

HERZ: Could you spell that, please?

SPIVAK: Yeah, its, in English (unintelligible), it means, in Russian, it means five hills. My town, the name was Five Hills because we had small hills around the town, so they called it Pietigora [ph]. Five, five hills.

HERZ: And can you describe that town a little bit for me?

SPIVAK: I was born in a small little town. I think we had about one hundred and thirty or one hundred and forty families.

HERZ And the houses? Can you describe like a little house or...

SPIVAK: Houses was one, a tall one, a short one. The roofs were covered with some hay, some of them, the richest one had ready metal roofs, We had no, we didn't have any sidewalks. We didn't have, yeah we had a few trees in the middle of the town and we had, we had a big church in the middle of the little town that we called...

HERZ: And was there an industry in the town?

SPIVAK: Eh, no. There was no industry, no. We didn't have any industry. People worked in the fields. The Ukraine is rich in wheat and fruit, too. Lakes with plenty of fish.

HERZ: And that was the main source of food? Food? That was your main source of food?

SPIVAK: Yeah, the main source, yeah. We got all our food in our town.

HERZ: Tell me a little bit about your father. What was his name?

SPIVAK: His name was, in English I would say Nathan. Nathan Spivak. He had a store, a small retail store, there. That was how we mad a living.

HERZ: And what kinds of things were sold in the store?

SPIVAK: Oh, he had, like glass dishes, I think that's about all. And then we lived together with my grandfather and grandmother. He had a store, too, but that was, already, that I would call a grocery. But it was mixed in grocery and then you could find some, some to put on your hair when you comb. And you could find some grease to grease the wagon. And you could find a shone tov [ph], a printing. And er...

HERZ: What was the word you used for printing? The word you used for printing?

SPIVAK: For printing? I think I forgot already. In Russian, how would you say printing? I forgot already.

HERZ: And your parents and your grandparents and you and your brother and sisters?

SPIVAK: Two separate stores. My father had a store and my grandfather had a store. But we lived together in one big house.

HERZ: Brothers and sisters?

SPIVAK: Yeah, the grandfather and the grandmother was living there with us. My father and mother, and we all seven children there.

HERZ: Seven children?

SPIVAK: Yeah.

HERZ: Do you remember the names?

SPIVAK: The names of my family. (he laughs) Sure.

HERZ: Of the children? Of your brothers and sisters?

SPIVAK: Yeah, we are still here. I mean some passed away. The youngster passed away. She was, I think, two and a half years old. She didn't come here. It was during the pogroms, when we were running from town to town. By the way, it started, the pogroms started right after the Revolution. The Revolution came in Russia in '17 and in '18, already, we had to really full scale pogroms. And we had to run from city to city, from town to town, until we reached, ready, the big city. And that was Uman.

HERZ: And that was...?

SPIVAK: Uman. The name Uman, already.

HERZ: Could you just spell Uman, please?

SPIVAK: I think I would spell it here U-M-A-N, Uman. And we had parks there. We had even there, what they call it here, a movie house. It was a (Russian) on there. That was already in the city. What when we came there, that was from the Revolution after my small town went on fire. They put on fire. After the pogroms there. And we ran from town to town for about four, five days when we reached Uman there. It was already the Bolsheviks were there, the Revolution was there already. That was already in the beginning of 19-, 1919 we were there. It was tough. We were hungry. Food was very scarce. We couldn't get it and we didn't have money. So slowly, but surely, my father died right there. My grandfather was killed in the town. The grandmother ran with us and she died right in the first big city when we arrived there. She died there. So we were left a mother with seven children. No food.

HERZ: And this was in Uman.

SPIVAK: In Uman. But it was already the Soviet government they, and they were trying to help us out but there was no food to pick up. And then you needed money. We didn't have money. We ran out when the entire village was already on fire. The house was on fire. We ran out, just what we had on our bodies.

HERZ: Did you go with people when you, when you all left or did you go by yourselves? Do you remember how?

SPIVAK: No, we rode families together. One family rode, uh, we ran, everybody ran in different, if I felt maybe I'll find a cousin in that city, so we ran there. By the time we came to Uman we find a few families from our little town, and my father was dead already

so my mother was the breadwinner and the mother and everything. It was a tough time before, until we reached America. Very tough.

HERZ: And where did you live in Uman?

SPIVAK: In Uman, the government, the Soviet government gave us a room, so we were a mother, a grandmother and seven children.

HERZ: In one room?

SPIVAK: In one room with two beds only. So whoever slept in the bed, and whoever slept on the floor. From there, I think this would be only my, my life history, so an uncle of mine that lived not far from my town, he came also to Uman and he said, "You're going to start out to go to America." At that time I didn't know have even an idea where America is.

HERZ: Tell me a little bit about your mother. What type of a woman was she? What was her maiden...?

SPIVAK: Like any other mother. She was devoted to the children and she would give her life for the children. So we...

HERZ: Do you...

SPIVAK: At least I, was there in that city of Uman. I was there for about six, seven months with my family. With a mother with the children. Then an uncle of mine said that he was going to America. He had a few dollars with him saved the government didn't know about.

HERZ: How did he hide the money from the government?

SPIVAK: Well, he hid it in the house. We didn't have banks in my little town. Whoever had money, he carried with him or he hided [sic] it. As a matter of fact, we also hide some money but when the pogroms started and they found the whole thing and we had it in the ground there. I would call it, over here, where you, in a little shack there in the house. They found it but we were left with nothing. I ran out only with a pair of pants and I think, er, with a shirt on the top. That was it. And my small little town went on fire.

HERZ: When you were in Uman, did your mother work?

SPIVAK: There was no work, was no work at that time. My mother found another friend that was also from our town, a woman, also widow. And they used to, I really now, first I think, I don't know where they got a little fruit. So they were sitting like they, on the market there selling, one day they sold. I don't know even where they bought it, at that time I didn't understand it. They bought it somewheres, probably in a little wholesale, or what. And then they were sitting on the floor selling it retail.

HERZ: In an open market?

SPIVAK: In an open market, yeah. And that's how it was there. Then that uncle of mine came with his wife with two children, three children, and he says he's going to America.

HERZ: Do you remember his name?

SPIVAK: Yeah.

HERZ: What was his name?

SPIVAK: I would say Jack.

HERZ: Jack.

SPIVAK: Yonkel, well, Jack Cochler [ph], yeah.

HERZ: Your brothers and sisters, were they older or younger than you?

SPIVAK: I'm the oldest one in the family, but on the way, so to speak, to America, we were on the borderline and we were trying to smuggle out of Russia and run into Bessarabia. Bessarabia was taken over by Roumania at that time. It was part of Russia. It was taken over by Roumania during the Revolution. So somehow with, with plenty of trouble, it took us three days by horse and wagon to come to a small town. It was on the borderline of the, Dneister, not to mix it up Dnieper(s), near Kiev.

HERZ: Could you spell that, please?

SPIVAK: Dneister? I would spell it D-N-E-S-T-E-R [sic], Dneister. I think it's a small lake runs around Bessarabia there.

HERZ: But you said you got there in a horse and wagon.

SPIVAK: To the borderline. To the Russian borderline there.

HERZ: And it was your mother and the children?

SPIVAK: No, my mother was left in Uman with the children. My uncle said first, "I'll take you with me and then I'll bring you to America." I didn't even have an idea how far America is at that time. "And then you'll be with me and you'll find a job there. You'll try to bring over also, bring over your mother with the children to the borderline, to the Russian border, the Russian-Roumanian borderline. And then we'll see what we're going to do when we'll be Bessarabia." Bessarabia, Kishinev was taken over already by the Roumanian people.

HERZ: When you left your family to come with your uncle, what was it like? Was there a good-bye? Can you...

SPIVAK: To the family, I didn't have an idea what they're going to do. All I knew that if I'm with the uncle, I'm safe. He was already a married man. He had, he had children almost my age so I

figured whatever will be, they don't, I was glad that he took me away from worries. (he laughs) He'll be the provider, everything.

HERZ: And how did your mother and brothers and sisters feel that you were coming to America?

SPIVAK: As a matter of fact, she said good-bye to me and said, "My son, I don't know whether I'll see you yet or not." We didn't know because we could have been killed on the way to the borderline. We had to go three days to travel by horse and wagon to come to the Roumanian-Bessarabian border.

HERZ: Do you remember taking anything with you? Personal belongings or anything?

SPIVAK: No. That was all burned up with the pogrom there. All I had was, when I left my little town, small town, I had a pair of pants and a shirt. That's all. My mother, I don't think, mu mother had even a dress. She had a, I would call it over here a petticoat. A petticoat with a, a little shawl on the top, and that's, my little town was on fire. I still remember the fire. All house were burned. And that was made by the, by the people that we lived with. Naturally the Jewish section was a separate section, er, I would say maybe it was about a hundred yards from the Jewish to the Gentile there. So after the pogrom was nothing left, just burned roofs and walls and that was it. Whatever was there was taken away.

HERZ: Was there a little school in that, in the town?

SPIVAK: Yeah, I think we had a small school but they wouldn't take any Jews there. So we had to go to a Jewish cheder. You know what a cheder is?

HERZ: Can you spell it, please.

SPIVAK: No. Well, call it a Jewish school. You not Jewish?

HERZ: I am. (he laughs)

SPIVAK: So you should know what a cheder is. You know what a yeshiva is?

HERZ: Yeah.

SPIVAK: So this is less than a yeshiva. Smaller than a yeshiva, yeah.

HERZ: And was that close to your home or did you have to go a far way?

SPIVAK: No, I had to walk maybe a half a block. It was a small town altogether. You could imagine, we had about one hundred twenty, one hundred thirty families, so how big is it? But every house

has a family. We didn't live like two families together in one house. It was small place.

HERZ: Can you describe a little bit, the house that you lived in?

SPIVAK: It was an old fashioned house. We didn't have electricity. We lived with kerosene lamp. Showers we didn't have. (he laughs) We didn't have, we didn't have running water. We had to go to a, we went only summer time, wintertime too, but summertime we had every weekend we had baths. Like public baths. This also the Jewish people made for themselves, yeah. Wintertime it was less. Here and there, we had.

HERZ: Do you remember having friends...

SPIVAK: Oh yeah.

HERZ: ... that were not Jewish or...

SPIVAK: No, no, no, we were...

HERZ: The same with your parents and the grandparents...

SPIVAK: That's right.

HERZ: Everybody was...

SPIVAK: Everybody. We didn't have any Gentiles and Gentiles, I mean, maybe we, I, if I met someone that I knew used to come to the store to buy in my father's store, my grandfather's store, but otherwise it was...

HERZ: So business was together but social was...

SPIVAK: Ah business, no social. We never, never.

HERZ: Do you remember one story about your mother or your father that you can tell.

SPIVAK: I remember, I remember when he came from the army during the Revolution, he came home, must have been in 1919, end of 1918, 1919.

HERZ: This is your father?

SPIVAK: My father came from the army and that was already the Revolution. He came home. Oh yeah, it was right before the Revolution that they fixed up telephone. Was a, yeah, not in the homes, was a, a station house. You came there. If a call came in so they sent a, they got a kid from street,"Go call Mr. So and So. Tell him that there is a telephone..." And you walked in, so he told you to wait a while, probably got in touch. I didn't understand it at that time. And that's how the telephone started, that was already during the Revolution.

HERZ: Did you speak on the telephone in, in...

SPIVAK: No, no, only when my father said that he was free, he's going home, so my mother was there. She spoke to him and she came to us and she told us that she spoke to my father. We say, "Momma how did you speak to him?" She said, "I don't know, you take something, you put it to your ear and to the mouth and you could talk to him." I didn't have any idea at, even in my mind, how it works. All I know that they put, we saw that they had a wires put in the town, yeah. Put in, I don't these, where the wires attached...

HERZ: A pole, A telephone pole.

SPIVAK: A pole, yeah. Poles, heavy things. And that was it.

HERZ: When your father went into the army, who took care of the store?

SPIVAK: It was closed.

HERZ: Not your mother?

SPIVAK: No, she was busy with, yeah, maybe she went in, we had the market one day a week, so she went to the store.

HERZ: And, and about the house a little bit. What was the kitchen like? Where, who did the cooking?

SPIVAK: The kitchen, it was like a, an oven there where you put in the bread or whatever it is. And right there we had no coal. We had to use wood. By the way, the wood was bought and brought in from the woods in summertime. We used to hire some, some people from the Gentiles. And they used to go chop some and bring it to us. And they sold it. What they pay, how much they got paid, this I don't know.

HERZ: Who did the cooking?

SPIVAK: Grandma or mother, yeah.

HERZ: Are there any special dishes that you remember having?

SPIVAK: Dishes. We were happy, we were lucky that we had dishes and we weren't particular no matter what. As long what we had to eat. But when it came ready, Friday that was the good day. In the morning already we had white bread, small, I would call it here, a cruller, something like a cruller, or what. And so, naturally Friday night and Saturday, these were the three meals that we had a good meal. For the rest of the week, the rest of the week, I mean we had enough bread. We weren't hungry but it was already, we didn't have manners like we have over here. (Mr. Herz laughs)

HERZ: Were the special prayers on Friday or Saturday that you remember?

SPIVAK: Yeah, we used to go to the temple, to the shul. Ah, my little town had three shuls. Three, yeah. Every shul, it had, at least about thirty people, twenty people come to pray. Every, weekdays, too. But weekdays already, wasn't that much. But Saturdays and holidays, they were full.

HERZ: When you started your journey to America, did you or your uncle have any idea of what it was going to entail, what America was like?

SPIVAK: Well, my uncle already was a worldly man. He was already an educated man. He was, graduated, I would call it over here an accountant. He was an accountant. Although in our house we didn't need an accountant, but he already graduated an accountant. He was considered a more or less a rich man. He had a nice store, an accepted store. He comes, he used to go away for about five or six weeks. He used to go away to Italy. Buy the Jewish, what, you know the, how do you call it, it looks like a, a lemon?

HERZ: Esrog?

SPIVAK: Esrog, yeah. So you know, yeah. Esrog and that long thing. What do you call, the lulav. Yeah, yeah. So he already considered...

HERZ: And did...

SPIVAK: ... a worthy man.

HERZ: Did he tell you anything about America or did you have any...

SPIVAK: Yeah, we heard about America. As a matter of fact, we had quite a number of people, they used to go to America, stay there for about a year or two years, make some money, go home, stay there. Our neighbor was four times in America. Every time he was here, two years, he came home and he was there two years or three years, went back to America. Four times he went to America.

HERZ: This was your neighbor in the little town?

SPIVAK: Yeah, in my neighbor, our neighbor. Yeah, he went and he told us something about America. He go with boat there. And it takes, let's say ten, fifteen days to come there. And down there you could work, and make a living and you save a few dollars and you come back.

HERZ: What did he tell you, other than you could work, about America...

SPIVAK: Oh, about America?

HERZ: ... that you had in your mind?

SPIVAK: Well, about America something, most of the time we didn't believe him. He says that there is enough food, nobody's hungry there. You could eat whatever, as much as you want. And life is entirely different. And he had stories that they used to sit on the porch there, every night if they didn't have the paper, and he used to tell them stories about America. Some we believe and some we didn't believe. First of all, we couldn't believe that everybody could have enough bread. It was, we couldn't imagine it that everybody has bread and makes a living.

HERZ: And then you got, you came to the port. You were, you came to the border with your uncle and his three children?

SPIVAK: So he was arrested by the Soviet Union for trying to smuggle, or somehow, I don't know, but he got out in two days. And he tried again. I mean that he was already, we knew already if they get you they would shoot you. They, they send you back or they send you away for ten days somewheres. So tried a second time and he made it. Then we had already there, people we used to call them contraband. They used to smuggle people back and forth, forth and back. Because they, the Dneister is not that big. I mean a good swimmer could swim it in, maybe, in twenty minutes. Maybe less yet. So, he went over there with his family and he left me on the border, there. And he said, "You wait. A man will come to you and he will tell you what to do." But in meantime, what shall I do and then he know that my father was dead already. My mother was left with seven children. So then, I have to mix two stories. While I was coming to, after my village, my town went on fire, we ran to the big city there. In the big city, he took me along to go with him to America but when we came to the border, we saw trouble. They catch you, they send you back. They catch you, they send you back and sometimes they send you away for three, four months. So he says like this, "I'll take my family." He took me with him to the border, to the Roumanian-Russian border, Bessarabia. "I'll go. The moment I'll reach there, the same man will come to you and he'll take." But since we were living there, he was there, also, hanging around about five, six months. They got him once, they got him twice and they kept on saying, the contraband people, say well you have to try, one night will be a lucky night and we'll do it. So, the meantime, he, he, he had many, many refugees gathered together in this town, in the next town. All these three, four small towns on the borderline between Roumania, between Bessarabia, and the Russians. So were many, many people came with idea to go to America. In the meantime, were no room there so in every hovel, maybe twenty, fifteen extra people that didn't have what to do, they didn't know what to do or what to eat, what, the least they could do is sell them hot tea, hot water, so they drink tea with a piece of bread, with anything, or sandwich, it'll be all right.

HERZ: How, how long were you, were you there?

SPIVAK: Well, I was there on the borderline, I would say roughly speaking, also about ten months.

HERZ: Ten months.

SPIVAK: Yeah.

HERZ: And from the borderline, you then came across and went to the port?

SPIVAK: No, to the borderline we used to come to Kishinev. Kishinev was the capital of Bessarabia. It's a big city, big city, like an American city. With sidewalks, with even telephones, with movie houses. Big city was ready there in Kishinev. Border was taken away from Russia...

HERZ: Can you spell Kishinev for me?

SPIVAK: Spell it any way you feel like because I don't know myself. I think I would say, Kishinev...

HERZ: Mr. Spivak is writing it down.

SPIVAK: Maybe...

HERZ: K-I-S-H...

SPIVAK: Kishinev.

HERZ: ... I-N-E-V, Kishinev.

SPIVAK: Yeah.

HERZ: And from there you went to the port?

SPIVAK: From Kishinev, yeah. From Kishinev was train ready. Then down there was ready in Kishinev the organization of the HIAS, the Jewish immigrant office, whatever you call it. We have it, I think, still in existence, if I'm not mistaken for the new immigrants. So I came, we came, I came to Kishinev with him. And then, I brought over my mother. I remained on the Russian side. My uncle went to Bessarabia. What was already Roumanian. He went to America. I brought my family. My father died during the Revolution. He died in 1919. So I brought my family, a mother with seven children, me included, seven children. She came to the border, the little town there, and we were, it was tough to find enough food and everything, but we had, we had what we called it, a business, that little we used to sell the hot water, people to make tea.

HERZ: Mr. Spivak, we're just going to take a break for a minute to turn the tape over and we'll be right back. This is Roger Herz, I'm with Boris Spivak. It's May 20, 1997.

SPIVAK: Fine, fine. They all were sitting there? (he refers to family members sitting outside of the recording booth in the recording studio)

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SPIVAK: Just remind me where was I.

HERZ: This is Roger Herz and we're here again with Mr. Boris Spivak and this is side two of the tape. Uh, I believe you, when we stopped, had just brought your mother and seven, or six brothers and sisters to come with you. Can you tell us a little bit. And then, we were going to the port to get, get you on the ship.

SPIVAK: Yeah. I went, no then my, my uncle took me. I came here to the borderline. From the borderline, we came, I came with my family, with my mother, with the children. We all came, they were stopping us, but we came to Kishinev. Into Kishinev. Down there Kishinev was already Roumania that time. There was no more Russian. It was taken away from Russia. And I, lived there for about three years, I would say. And in 1923, November first, I arrived to New York.

HERZ: From, what was the port that you left?

SPIVAK: Constanta.

HERZ: Can you spell?

SPIVAK: Constanta. Spell it anyway you feel like. It's on the Black Sea.

HERZ: Okay. And from Kishinev you got to Constanta?

SPIVAK: No, from Russia. Oh, I think, yeah, from, from, Kishinev I went to Constanta. That's Roumania, that's right.

HERZ: And, and how did you get there, to Constanta?

SPIVAK: Oh, that's, that's already, the HIAS was already in Kishinev.

HERZ: The...?

SPIVAK: The HIAS, the Hebrew immigration office.

HERZ: Right.

SPIVAK: And they already, the HIAS, they, that was their job. They took me, they took me on the train. Then they brought me to Constanta where the Black Sea is there. I took the boat and I, thirty-one days I was on the boat.

HERZ: What was it like leaving your mother and brothers and sisters?

SPIVAK: Oh, it was very, I, I felt lost. I felt lost because I was still under my mother since I didn't have my father. So my mother was already the, the, the father and the mother. So I felt like a, a lost sheep.

HERZ: Was there a little celebration or a good-bye?

SPIVAK: No, it was crying. It was crying. My mother was crying and I was crying, too. I didn't know what, what, what's going to happen to me. That's a thirty-one days shipping trip, the boat trip.

HERZ: Describe a little bit the passage on the boat.

SPIVAK: Oh, that was an experience, special from a boy like me that I was in small place. I never saw a big lake like the Black Sea. And I was so, and I never saw a boat.

HERZ: You never saw a boat?

SPIVAK: Never saw, I mean a...

HERZ: A big...

SPIVAK: See, the little boats in my town, they are little light boats. A ship with people? We were on the boat with seventeen, eighteen hundred people. We were sleeping on the floors and we had to, up and down. They had sleepers there.

HERZ: Do you remember the name of the ship?

SPIVAK: Embirikos [ph] A Greek ship. Embirikos [ph].

HERZ: Embirikos [ph]?

SPIVAK: Embirikos [ph], with an "s." Yeah, we stopped off. And the first stop was, I believe, after we left, we went, we came into Bulgaria. From Bulgaria, we didn't stay too long there. They load up, I think in a day or two, freight. Freight, it was a freight ship. But then they, they made up one floor for, for people too, you know. Then we came into Constantinople. Constantinople they told us that an American doctor is going to, instead of getting the checkups whether we healthy or not, instead of getting it in New York when we arrived to New York, they want to do it here in Europe before they bring me. Because the HIAS was responsible for me. So in Constantinople we stopped there. First of all they told us for disinfection. But naturally we were walking around with old clothes. European clothes, he says, "We don't know. We going to see doctors there. American people. Dress up nice." So we dressed up in new suits.

HERZ: Had you brought something with you or...?

SPIVAK: Oh yeah, before in Kishinev, already, my mother, we went already, they helped us out. And then some uncle sent us money to Bessarabia already. It was an interchange there. Mail could, from Russia you couldn't send in, you know, getting in there. But Roumania already and Bessarabia was open to the, to the entire world. So they took us first, they say we had to go through, in Constantinople. And we'll see an American doctor. So we put on the new suit and everything.

They took us in. We had to undress, and the doctor examined me. And they took our clothes, the one we had for disinfection. Because the truth of the matter is we came in filthy, dirty, with louses and all that. So my suit, my pants, a pair of cheap pants. I didn't have the jacket, I think, it wasn't cold yet, so I think I came just in a shirt with the pants there to see the American doctor. They examined me, they say yeah, they actually were looking for venereal disease. I'm all right but the clothes have to be disinfected. So when my pants came back and they put on, so they were (he laughs), went over my knees. They shrunk because they was cheap pants there. I didn't have money to buy good pants. And a matter of fact, I didn't know about (?) pants. I said, " I need a pair of pants." The guy sold me a pair of pants. That so, I came out with short pants, and that's how I came to America, with the short pants.

HERZ: Do you remember...

SPIVAK: They were short...

HERZ: Do you remember any part of the medical examination?

SPIVAK: Well, no, it was a regular examination. I think was, they were looking for venereal disease. They check me on that, too. And that was about all. But when I came back, already, to the boat, my clothes were short on me. (he laughs)

HERZ: Can you describe to me a little bit the accommodations on the boat. Where you...

SPIVAK: On the accommodation, was, I mean the food you had enough. When I say food, they gave us coffee in the morning with bread. At lunchtime they gave us something. It wasn't bad. It wasn't Constantinople we got there. From Bulgaria, we went into Constantinople. From Constantinople, we went, I think, to Italy. In Italy, from Italy we went to Spain. Also with the, I think it was with the Mediterranean. We already, and then we fell in unexpectedly to the Atlantic. Down there no more easy, easy doing there. So while we were there, it was I still remember, at first it wasn't bad, but on the second day in the Atlantic, after we left Spain, oh boy, it was on a Saturday and there was a shul. Yeah, it was time we go, 'bout fifteen, sixteen on the, people, mostly Jewish people. So we had a shul. And a woman gave birth there. On the boat.

HERZ: Gave birth?

SPIVAK: Gave birth. So they made a bris there. You know what a bris is?

HERZ: Mmm.

SPIVAK: Yeah, and the women, and the captain gave them, the women, flour to bake, the flour make cake. While we were eatingg the cake and we entered the Atlantic, so one Jew started to go, "Oh boy, that kugel was too fat for me." And we all start (he laughs) throwing up. And finally, and I was sick like a dog all the fourteen days I was on the Atlantic, there. Fourteen days it took me from Spain to reach New York, I was so sick I couldn't even walk. I couldn't even walk. And on food, I couldn't, I couldn't look at food. But the moment, the moment the boat stopped, at the pier here, right here, the moment I walked down I feel, I don't like to vomit no more and all that. I was like a new born guy.

HERZ: Did they take on people in Spain and Italy or mostly at the beginning?

SPIVAK: No. The immigrants, we all came the same group. Right from, now there was at that time, was still sitting even a Russian consul there, I don't know under whose authority. And we had to go through a Russian consul. And there was no more routes out. As our comes. And that's how I came to America.

HERZ: And, but you came by yourself. Did you meet people on the ship?

SPIVAK: My mother. Oh, on the ship? No my group, entire group came here to America, came, came a delegate, yeah. Some people that they had their parents or friends in New York naturally came to the boat to take them. I didn't have anybody in New York. The one that sent me the papers, affidavits, with everything, he was an uncle of my mother. She didn't know him. He was in this country here since 1909 or 1910. So I...

HERZ: Do you remember his name?

SPIVAK: His name, I forgot already. His name I forgot. But they kept me, on the, on the island here, on Ellis Island, they kept me here for nine or ten days.

HERZ: When you first came through the Atlantic and into the port, what, what was the first thing you saw? What did you feel like?

SPIVAK: Well, I felt relief, first of all. No more, no more dizziness, that vomiting and all that. I feel relief. But nobody came to take me down. And then the HIAS at that time, took, on this possibility, took off some passengers, but when it came to me, the quota was out. I mean nobody was there to take me. He took so many people and then they ask me if I have money to show, that if I had ten dollars in pocket, they would let me go. I had only thirty-five cents. So what they did, I imagine, the people from HIAS on board said, "Don't worry, you'll stay, you'll stay here. We'll see what we could do." Naturally, they spoke to me in Yiddish. I didn't know English. So they, but I gave them the address that my mother gave me an address to in Springfield, Mass. She had a landsman, a bose [ph].

HERZ: A what?

SPIVAK: A landsman, a bose [ph]. They were born and raised in the same town. So I had this address. Now, when the HIAS came and asked me if I had any relatives here. I say no, but I have one address here and two letters. They got in touch with them. And...

HERZ: What, go ahead.

SPIVAK: They got in touch with that so called uncle of mine. I call him uncle, I, I don't know whether he is my uncle or he wasn't my uncle. But he was a landsman of mine. But the HIAS lent me ten dollars and how, that's how they let me out of this island and they let me out of the boat. And I went from here to, with the train to Springfield, Mass.

HERZ: Let's go back a minute to coming in. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first...?

SPIVAK: Yeah.

HERZ: What was, what, can you describe that?

SPIVAK: Well, well, we knew that the, a stretch out an arm, I mean they, people that they knew already about the, when I was on board, I knew already when you, you recognize New York, there is a statue with an arm.

HERZ: Had you seen a photo, a picture or...?

SPIVAK: No, I had just heard about it, heard about it. The Statue of Liberty. So when, when I came here, I, I felt that I'm already on safe ground. He sent me, that uncle of mine sent in the ten dollars but the HIAS was there already before I got the ten dollars. And they let me down.

HERZ: And how did you get from the ship to Ellis Island?

SPIVAK: From the ship? From the ship, they let, they, we came out of the ship right here to Ellis Island.

HERZ: On to Ellis Island.

SPIVAK: We came right here. Yeah, the ship, I think parked somewhere over here, because I remember, seventy years ago, seventy-two years ago. We came here, was, like rows. We used to come in, I think it was with ropes. I think that the row there was with ropes. Tables and tables and tables. This one was a doctor there examined me, too. And this I remember. I have to take off my shirt, my body, they examined me. If I have venereal disease or, the doctor asked me, oh, I didn't understand it. So whatever he said, I said yes. Now I don't recall what I said. And that's how, and then a man took me

down. He was from HIAS. And he says, "Here, I'm giving you two pieces of paper." As a matter of fact, he pinned it on. I had, I came with a, if I'm not mistaken it was right here (he gestures), a white winter coat. So he gave me one sheet in the front pinned on, in the back and saying that people should help me out when, in the subway or what because I am a new immigrant. I mean I understand it now. A new immigrant. I don't know the language. So that's how, well, I'm here already, now they brought us over, I think it was, two more, one Russian, one Austrian, Gentiles here with me. But nobody came. They gave me instructions, "You come to a place, you go to the, ask for, you have to go to Springfield." Springfield, this I had to remember. Springfield. And with the paper, on my paper on the front and back it was written out, whoever (unintelligible) should help him out to reach Springfield. So I came to Grand Central. I still remember, came to Grand Central. And I saw everybody go (?), but I didn't know that, I didn't know they dropped a coin there to, I go in there. It doesn't move, doesn't move. So I bend down. So the guy from the booth he come out. I imagine he was probably yelling at me but when he saw the signs, he says, "Come to me. I'll go with you." I mean, with the sense, he didn't. I didn't understand what he was saying anyway. So I had the, well, there was the guy who gave me the ten dollars. I say, "Here, that's all I have." Only money. I didn't even know what money means. So he, I imagine, he changed it and threw in the coin for me. With the both signs. And he told me, "This is Grand Central." I mean, I didn't understand nothing. "This train will take you to Springfield, Massachusetts." But I didn't know how far Massachusetts is, how long it's going to take me. So every time, at that time, if, a guy from the company used to run in, sell candies, papers on the, on the trains. On the especially on the New England. So when a guy ran in, "Five cents for chocolate, five cent." So I thought he's calling. The guy told me, "You'll hear, you'll hear," in Yiddish. The guy told me, "They call out the stations. Now you listen (?). You go out. Someone will be there to pick you up." But I didn't know how far is Springfield. So the moment, as long as it stopped, the train stopped at the station, we had a few stops before we reached Springfield, Mass. I don't know, forgot what stops were there. But any time the guys from the, they sell the drinks and ice cream there on the train, (unintelligible), he says "Five cents." I thought he's calling the station. I grabbed my valise. And my mother gave me a pillow, yet. So I had a small, it wasn't what I'm saying, a valise, it was like a bag. I had a bag some clothes or whatever it is and a pillow. I should have a pillow. We had to sleep. Here I'm carrying a pillow, I'm carrying this. But finally the, the man on the, on the train, he sees that, he could help with me. He says, he showed me, I should sit on the chair. He will come. He will take me down and be Springfield. He'll take me down to the door.

HERZ: I just want to go back to Ellis Island for a minute. Do you remember, you were here for how many days?

SPIVAK: I believe it was around nine days, it may be ten days.

HERZ: Tell us a little bit about your experiences in those nine days.

SPIVAK: Well, nine days it wasn't bad, it wasn't bad. First of all, every morning we had, we used to walk in some of these old, old restaurants, long tables. And you have to follow (unintelligible), you take the first seat, the second, the third, long tables was there for breakfast. For lunch, so that was. And there was already, this I didn't see in Europe. I mean, first of all, I didn't have enough bread. But it was a roll there, was a cup, was sugar, it was coffee or tea. I think it was tea, if I'm not mistaken. So every morning, I was brought up here. In the evening, they took us to the basement there. Locked up. We were locked, we couldn't get out. And then...

HERZ: Do you remember, was there a story or something special that happened while you were here that sticks out in you mind?

SPIVAK: Oh well, yeah, we, they took us, I think we had twice a week, we have here, we have a shul. We had to go, whoever wants to go, to doven, yeah, so we had a shul. And we had baths. They took us to bathhouses, also. There were no showers. We had to sit in a bath. And in between they gave us some cookies. A guy, they gave us a banana too. One guy had a banana, but he didn't know what to do with it. At that time, but I knew already, I saw banana. So I told him, "That's soap." Just to make fun out of it. I say, "That's soap." He said, "I rub it, I rub it but no, no suds coming out." That was the experience I had. It was nine or ten days. As a matter of fact, the last day they told me, if I wouldn't have the money, if nobody comes to call for me, my valise was already back on my boat, yeah, to go back.

HERZ: So if nobody would have come...

SPIVAK: To take me, they would ship me back. Because I didn't have the ten dollars and lucky enough, the HIAS found that uncle, the uncle sent the money and they came and I was out of the boat.

HERZ: So then, you, you arrived in Springfield?

SPIVAK: Oh, in Springfield already that was, I arrived there, in the evening. And down there, the uncle waited for me already. The so called uncle waited for me, and he already walked around. I think I came under the name Beryl, Beryl.

HERZ: Beryl?

SPIVAK: Beryl, yeah, Spivak instead of Boris. And well, yeah, he got me and took me home.

HERZ: To his...

SPIVAK: Yeah, to his house.

HERZ: Can you describe the house a little bit for me?

SPIVAK: Oh, the house was for me an eye opening. It was all lit up, it was a kitchen and bathrooms. It was a private house. A private home. I didn't see that in my house. I was born, I was raised, all my friends and all my family, we didn't have anything like that. Hot water, cold water, shower. And then he tells me, "Listen, I think you need shave." I said, "You think I need a shave?" I was already nineteen years old, twenty years old. Because I took a shave in Bucharest. The last shave I took was in Bucharest. At that time we didn't have these razors throwaways. So I went to a barber. And on the boat, I didn't have money to pay the barber. I forgot, I didn't take a shave for so many days. So that's how it was. I came to him. But then already, he took me in the morning when I first slept over, took a bath and a shave, and he took me over to a, I believe it was a trolley that took me from Springfield, Mass. to Boston. Not to exactly Boston, I forgot the name of it, also a part, I think, one of the, of Boston, I think five little towns, so that was one of the towns there already. Down there I came into an uncle.

HERZ: In, in, you came to another uncle?

SPIVAK: Yeah, this was already an uncle, my mother's uncle and down there, I was about four or five weeks, or maybe seven weeks, eight weeks. And I had friends, also from Europe, that they came the same time with me but they came, most of my friends I came with all to Hartford, Connecticut because down there we had a big society.

HERZ: And, and did you get a job?

SPIVAK: Down there, yeah, down there I got a job. They found me job there. They asked me if I, in Europe they told us, "When you come to America, you say yes, whatever they ask you, could you paint, could you, are you a carpenter, yeah, yeah, so they'll give you a job. And down there, while you be down there, you'll learn a trade. That's how you going to make a living."

HERZ: And what kind of a...?

SPIVAK: So when I came to Worcester, Massachusetts, that time already, that's I left my landsman, and I went to my family there. So down there, first job they found me, 'cause I remember Sunday, this guy in Worcester, Mass. used to go, he had like, I would call it a market, there, where people come looking for jobs, and bosses come to pick up people there. So a guy comes over, says, in Yiddish naturally, they knew that I'm, "Are you a painter?" "Uh, yeah, a painter." My uncle told me I should say yes, yes. "I am, I am." I come. He says,

"Here." There was kiddie cars. So I had to paint the seats, the wooden seats. The wheels, naturally, were separate attached but before they attach it, so the wooden seats for the kiddie cars, I had to paint. So I took a, I was, I never held a brush in my life. So the paint was standing somewheres. I took the brush and by the time I reached the piece of board was no more paint on the brush, was on the floor. So the guy said, "You told me that you experienced painter? How come it's like that?" I said, "I don't know. In Europe we used to paint that way." I never saw paint and I never saw a brush in my life. Finally, that's how it was. So I worked there and they showed me how. I told them I'm not an expert. They show me how to paint. I think I was there maybe four, five weeks. Then, I had (unintelligible). My friends from Europe yet, they came let's say six months after me, eight months, ten months. That was mass migration at that time. Every week they used to come in. So I wrote a letter to, out to Connecticut to my friend there. I say I'm in Worcester, Massachusetts by an uncle, but I haven't got any immigrant, no immigrants, here they came to New York, Philadelphia, Chicago. But they wouldn't go to Massachusetts and small towns then. He says, "So why you have to stay there for? Come to Hartford, too. You'll find something." So one day I said to my uncle, so called uncle, "Uncle, I'm going to Hartford." "Why do you going to Hartford?" I didn't even know the worth of, what a dollar means. How much I could buy for a dollar. I say, I was figuring on the Roumanian money. I say, "The guy, my friend, makes there maybe," lays [ph], the Roumanian lays [ph], the Roumanian dollar, call it a lay [ph].

HERZ: Could you spell it?

SPIVAK: Humm?

HERZ: Could you spell that?

SPIVAK: Lay [ph]? I don't know. Maybe L-E-I or, something like that. (he pauses) So I say, "No. I think, Uncle, I wouldn't stay here because my friends are making so much money. "What do you mean, so much?" "They make maybe two thousand lays[ph] a week." He says, "What kind of lays [ph]? Your working here on dollars. What are you telling me about lays [ph]? We working for dollars." Well, to make the story short, I say, "I'm going." Why? I didn't like to stay there because they were all, all Americanized already. Even their kids spoke English and I was like a stranger there. The old aunt of mine, she would talk to me Yiddish but the youngsters, they didn't understand Yiddish. They were born here in this country.

HERZ: When you got to Hartford, do you remember what, what you...?

SPIVAK: Oh, to Hartford, to Hartford, I came already down there. They had many new immigrants, down there open. The sky was the limit because I had everybody there. People

that I lived with in Roumania, people I lived in Russia with them.

HERZ: Did you get another job in Hartford?

SPIVAK: In Hartford, yeah. In Hartford, down there Capital Avenue is the biggest, the biggest, I think in America, they work in the military all day round. Day and night. Twenty-four hours a day. Military. Cannons, heavy artillery, everything there (?).

HERZ: And when did you meet your wife?

SPIVAK: Oh, my wife, I met already, I was a full American, I was already. I met my wife in '25. I was in Canada at that time. How I come to Canada? When I, when I came to America, there was an understanding. I go first, my uncle took me. And then I'll bring my mother. But in between, my uncle had to leave soon, Bessarabia. My mother came to, also she smuggled, she came to Kishinev. And what was your question? I forgot.

HERZ: We were talking about how you met your wife. What was...

SPIVAK: Oh, the wife.

HERZ: What was her name?

SPIVAK: Oh, oh my wife. My wife's name was Anna.

HERZ: And you were in Canada, and you went to Canada?

SPIVAK: And I went to, yeah, my family was already in Canada so I went to see my mother there. Down there I met my wife.

HERZ: And how many children do you have?

SPIVAK: One. I have only one daughter. That's all I have.

HERZ: And her name?

SPIVAK: Sylvia.

HERZ: And grandchildren?

SPIVAK: Yeah.

HERZ: How many?

SPIVAK: One son, one grandchild is sitting here with his wife, with a baby, and the other, the other one is here too. She has a doctorate.

HERZ: Well, Mr. Spivak, we're just about done. Do you have any, one thing that you'd like to say about your experiences coming to America or about America?

SPIVAK: No, well, it was a hard experience. It came to me the hard way, but I'm glad I'm here. I have no complaints with America.

HERZ: Well, I'd like to thank you very much for coming and sharing your experiences with us.

SPIVAK: Thank you.

HERZ: This is Roger Herz, it's May 20, 1997, and we've been speaking with Boris Spivak. Thank you again.

SPIVAK: Thank you.

END SIDE TWO
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