

EI-888

DINAH ANTONOFF

BIRTHDATE: NOVEMBER 4, 1912

INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 20, 1997

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 84

RUNNING TIME:

INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST

RECORDING ENGINEER: PAUL SIGRIST

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

POLAND, 1929

AGE: 16

SHIP: MAJESTIC

PORT: GDANSK

RESIDENCES:

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, May 20th, 1997. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio and I'm here with Mrs. Dinah Antonoff. Mrs. Antonoff came from Poland in 1929. She was 16 years old at that time and she is the sister-in-law of Boris Spevak [PH], whom we have just interviewed just moments before we started this interview. Mrs. Antonoff was not processed at Ellis Island but we're going to hear her immigration story about coming from Poland. Can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

ANTONOFF: November 4th, 1912.

SIGRIST: And what was your birth name, please?

ANTONOFF: My birth name was [clears throat] Dina Oppenheim.

SIGRIST: Okay. Can you spell Dina?

ANTONOFF: D-I-N-A.

SIGRIST: And that's—you go by Dinah.

ANTONOFF: Right.

SIGRIST: D-I-N-A-H.

ANTONOFF: Yeah, to make it—

SIGRIST: But originally it was D-I-N-A.

ANTONOFF: Right.

SIGRIST: And can you spell Oppenheim for me, please?

ANTONOFF: O-P-P-E-N-H-E-I-M.

SIGRIST: Okay. November 4th, 1912 was your birthday.

ANTONOFF: Right.

SIGRIST: Where in Poland were you born?

ANTONOFF: A small city named Sierps.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

ANTONOFF: Yeah. S-I-E-R-P-S.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me the location within Poland? Where is that country, roughly?

ANTONOFF: Yeah. It's the Divorsa [PH] region.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about your birth? Did anyone, Mother, Father, ever tell you a story about the day you were born?

ANTONOFF: No. But I remember I had the measles when I was about two years old.

SIGRIST: Oh, yes? What do you remember about having the measles?

ANTONOFF: I was very, very sick. I had a croup. After—my voice changed. And after I got well I got a new outfit. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: Can you describe the outfit? Do you remember what it looked like?

ANTONOFF: Well, a coat, a little coat with a hat. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: Do you remember how they treated the measles?

ANTONOFF: [clears throat] No. In our town, there was a—there was one doctor and there was one who was called a felcher. He was, well, what you call—he—he was not a doctor. But he was a—now, what do you call one that [clears throat] is not exactly a doctor.

SIGRIST: But did he help?

ANTONOFF: Yeah, he was able to help. Yeah.

SIGRIST: What—what was his name again? Or what was the name of the—

ANTONOFF: We called him a felcher.

SIGRIST: Can you spell felcher?

ANTONOFF: F-E-L-C-H-E-R.

SIGRIST: Is that a Yiddish term, felcher?

ANTONOFF: It's really Polish.

SIGRIST: Polish term, uh-huh.

ANTONOFF: That's how we called him.

SIGRIST: I see.

ANTONOFF: Polish.

SIGRIST: Do you remember some of the treatments that he might have done on people?

ANTONOFF: Yeah. [clears throat] Yeah, they did the throat, for the throat they swabbed the throat. It was a terrible feeling but it helped.

SIGRIST: What did they swabbed it with? Do you—

ANTONOFF: W—with a swab, cotton on a stick and with—with iodine.

SIGRIST: No wonder it was unpleasant.

ANTONOFF: [coughs] It was terrible but it helped. It helped, like the throat was bad, like, maybe very serious but this helped.

SIGRIST: Any other remedies that you remember?

ANTONOFF: And then they put on the chest, the mustard plasters on the chests.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what a mustard plaster is, please?

ANTONOFF: Yeah, was a—took a piece of cloth, soft cloth, and put mustard on it and put it on the chest and then put some warm towels over it. And that heated the chest and it helped the congestion.

SIGRIST: I see.

ANTONOFF: And it helped.

SIGRIST: Mm-hmm. Can we start by you giving me her father's name, please?

ANTONOFF: My father's name [clears throat] was Shloma.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

ANTONOFF: Solomon, we called him here. In English, it was Solomon.

SIGRIST: Can you—can you say the—

ANTONOFF: The Yiddish name?

SIGRIST: Yes, the Yiddish name.

ANTONOFF: Shloma. S-H-L-O-M-A.

SIGRIST: And what did he do for a living in Poland?

ANTONOFF: In Poland? In Poland, he—he was a—a—he learned to be a shoemaker apprentice. He left Poland. He didn't like what he was doing. He went to England. We were separated from him. He left—he left my mother with four little babies. He went to England. He had his family in England and he was going to bring us all over there, but in the meantime the First World War broke out. So we were separated. We grew up without my—I—I met my father here when I came to this country when I was 16 years old.

SIGRIST: So he eventually moved from England—

ANTONOFF: I didn't know my father.

SIGRIST: —to the United States.

ANTONOFF: What?

SIGRIST: He eventually went from England to the United States.

ANTONOFF: Yeah. He went from England [clears throat]—no, he was in Russia. He was—yeah, from England, yeah, came to the United States.

SIGRIST: Can you describe a little bit of his personality? What was he like as a person? His temperament or—

ANTONOFF: He was a very nervous person. His young life was very—not good. He didn't like what he was doing. H—he was—he—he grew up in the small town, Sierps. And there, everybody was—and my grandmother lived with us and she was very religious. She was fanatic. And he—and he—he was not happy at home. [clears throat] And I found out later that one of the reasons he left to go to England was because he was very unhappy at—you know, his home life and also with the whole environment. He was not religious and it was forced upon him. And he didn't like what he was doing, the shoemaker things. He was a singer. He had a wonderful bass baritone, yeah, a singer. He liked to sing. In fact, in this country he—he led a choir in the synagogue.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you lived with his mother. Yes? You said his grandmother. You lived with the grandmother?

ANTONOFF: My grandmother. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: Yes.

ANTONOFF: My mother's mother, [clears throat] my mother's mother.

SIGRIST: Your mother—his mother.

ANTONOFF: My mother's mother.

SIGRIST: But you were talking about his mother's mother?

ANTONOFF: No.

SIGRIST: The—the religious—

ANTONOFF: Oh, they were—no, the religious was my mother's mother.

SIGRIST: Was your mother's mother.

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see.

ANTONOFF: His mother was in England. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

ANTONOFF: Ida.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

ANTONOFF: Ilexandrovich.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

ANTONOFF: [chuckles] Here, they shorten it to Alexander. [clears throat] I-L-E—
Ile—X—Ilex—A-N-D-R-O-V-I-C-H.

SIGRIST: Great. Thank you. What do you know about her background?

ANTONOFF: My mother's? [clears throat] Oh, yeah. She was a pretty girl. She was a seamstress. She was a seamstress. [clears throat] And when my f—when my father was away from us she sort of supported us a little bit, [unclear] with her sewing for people.

SIGRIST: And it was your mother's mother who lived with you.

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about your grandmother and—and how her—her religious—

ANTONOFF: [clears throat]

SIGRIST: —fanaticism affected your life?

ANTONOFF: Oh, I didn't like her [clears throat] that we were four girls and she ruled. See, my mother was weak and—and my mother let—let her rule. She ruled everything. And we didn't like her because we were going to school, Polish—

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SIGRIST: Why didn't you like her?

ANTONOFF: Because she was ruling. She was very dictatorial. She didn't let us—she was so fanatically religious.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me about one incident that—

ANTONOFF: Yes.

SIGRIST: —you—

ANTONOFF: She didn't let me comb my hair on—on—on Satu—on—on Sabbath. She didn't let me read a—a Polish book on Sabbath, [clears throat] you know. And so I didn't like her.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you were four girls.

ANTONOFF: We were four girls.

SIGRIST: Can you name everybody for me?

ANTONOFF: Yeah. One was Gertrude, Miriam, myself and Jean.

SIGRIST: And is that the birth order?

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yes.

ANTONOFF: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah, so you're the third.

ANTONOFF: Yeah, I'm the third.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ANTONOFF: Two of us are alive. Two died.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the house that you lived in?

ANTONOFF: [sniffs] Yeah, I remember it very well. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: Okay, describe it. Walk me through the house and describe it.

ANTONOFF: Yeah. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: Do you want to stop and we'll get you some water?

ANTONOFF: [clears throat] [sentence unclear]. [clears throat] I—I have that condition.

SIGRIST: Do—do you want to stop?

ANTONOFF: No, no.

SIGRIST: We can stop—

ANTONOFF: No, no.

SIGRIST: —and I'll get you some water.

ANTONOFF: No.

SIGRIST: All right. Well, then describe your house.

ANTONOFF: [clears throat] The house was [clears throat] two big rooms, two big rooms and—and there was a balcony. It was a fairly new building, a big brick building, but where my father [clears throat] was not home. So we had to give up one room with a balcony and we lived just in one room. But it was a large room. And—

SIGRIST: Why did you give up—

ANTONOFF: —everything—because you couldn't pay the rent. And everything was in that room. There was the [clears throat]—was a separation where we were sleeping, was a large room, and then was the—the stove with the—and was no—no—no toilet. We had to go to the toilet outside. Outside in the winter and the cold.

SIGRIST: So who's living in this one room? The four girls.

ANTONOFF: Four girls, my mother and my grandmother.

SIGRIST: Okay. So there are—

ANTONOFF: A—and my grandfather. But my grandfather died. I liked my grandfather.

SIGRIST: What—how old were you when he died?

ANTONOFF: Oh, [clears throat] I must have been maybe six years old.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

ANTONOFF: Oh, I liked my grandfather. He—he taught me to—I used to sit—he used to have me on—on his lap and he was teaching me how to read Hebrew, you know. And I learned. I learned. I—I still remember. I never went to school—Hebrew school but I remember what my grandfather taught me.

SIGRIST: Can you say a—a prayer in Hebrew that your grandfather taught you?

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Would you do it right now, please?

ANTONOFF: Oh, yeah. Let me see. [speaking in Hebrew]. That—that's a—a—over wine; you make that prayer over wine.

SIGRIST: And what do you remember about when your grandfather died?

ANTONOFF: I—I was very sad when he died. [clears throat] I—when my mo—my grandmother died, I didn't care. [laughs] When my grandmother died, I wanted to go to school the day she died, but my mother didn't let us go to school. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: Your religion was Jewish.

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: [unclear]. Can—and your grandmother was very religious.

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: So—so we've talked a little bit about that.

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue in town?

ANTONOFF: Yeah. In fact, we lived—there was a big synagogue. We lived right opposite the synagogue. I remember that synagogue was—the whole thing. In fact, [clears throat] when people were talk—after the war, people talk about going back, visit my town. And I had—

SIGRIST: Which war are you talking about?

ANTONOFF: Sierps. The—

SIGRIST: No, which war?

ANTONOFF: —Second—the Second World War.

SIGRIST: The Second World War. Uh-hmm.

ANTONOFF: And I had no desire to go back because that synagogue was not there, and the synagogue was really inscribed in my mind that this was my home. I lived—yeah, remember that big synagogue very much.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about the relationship between the gentile population and the Jewish population in this town?

ANTONOFF: Bad, very bad. We were afraid of the—the boys. The—the gentile boys used to chase us. And we ran. Mmm, this was accepted. That's how it was. We ran. They'd chase and also were throwing stones sometimes. But that was—the relationship was not a good one. And of course, in our town [clears throat] the—the merchants were all Jewish. And that contributed to anti-Semitism in town because all the merchants were Jewish and they—the other population was gentile, Christian.

SIGRIST: What did the gentiles do for a living?

ANTONOFF: [clears throat] You know—

SIGRIST: If the Jews were all the merchants—

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —what—

ANTONOFF: The merchants in town, yeah. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: What did the gentiles do?

ANTONOFF: [sentence unclear]. I'm trying to think. [unclear]. Oh, yes. There was a—you know, a [unclear]—what do you call, one that—the—the horses, that put their—the horses' shoes—

SIGRIST: Oh, like a blacksmith?

ANTONOFF: A blacksmith, yeah. The—the [unclear] was a blacksmith. Hmm, stuff like that.

SIGRIST: But you remember the relationship between the two groups—

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —as not being very good.

ANTONOFF: No. no, no.

SIGRIST: When you were growing up in—in this town in Pol—Poland, what did you know about America? How did you think about America before you got to America?

ANTONOFF: Oh, that the streets are paved with gold. [unclear] come and—and then we were already planning to go. You know, my father was just all—working already on the thing. My mother used to tell us, “You get it in America,” whatever we wanted. “Forget about it. In America, you’ll have it. You’ll have everything in America, everything in America.” So we had a vision of America as being great. However, I was not happy about going to America because I had a lot of friends. I was very sociable.

SIGRIST: How did it make you feel when—when you knew you were going to be leaving?

ANTONOFF: I—I was sad, even though—first of all, I—my—I didn’t know my father. So I had no love for him; I didn’t know him. So seeing my father was a little frightening. I was a little frightened.

SIGRIST: Where was he living in the United States?

ANTONOFF: He was living in New York.

SIGRIST: He was in New York City. So—

ANTONOFF: In Brooklyn. In Brooklyn. Yeah.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me a little bit about getting ready to leave your town? What did you have to do before you left?

ANTONOFF: We had to go to Warsaw twice. We had to go to Warsaw and we had to get the visa and stuff, so Warsaw was the—the—the big city that we had to go to and make all the arrangements there. And my mother bought some things. My father told her what to—not to

bring—not to bring—not to bring pillows. You know, he—he was already modern, you know, because people—so in our time we did not come with pillows.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things that your father told your mother that she should bring?

ANTONOFF: [clears throat] I know we brought a set of flatware. We brought that.

SIGRIST: Forks and spoons—

ANTONOFF: Yeah, yeah. Silver, silver, silver-plated. So, yeah. Yeah, we brought that.

SIGRIST: Was there something that you brought that was yours?

ANTONOFF: Oh, I brought—I graduated school with a guy, a book, honor—an honor—I was an honorary student. And it was unusual because Polish—you know, the anti-Sem—anti-Semitism that existed, it was very rare that myself and another girl from the [unclear], the two of us graduated so the whole town knew that graduated with hon—so that book I kept until I moved to [unclear]. It was yellow. The [chuckles]—the things were crumbling. That was precious to me.

SIGRIST: So you brought that from Poland.

ANTONOFF: I brought that, yeah. Yeah. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: What about clothing or—

ANTONOFF: Yeah. Well, we—we got new dresses when we came.

SIGRIST: Can you describe one of the dresses, what it looked like?

ANTONOFF: Yeah, the dress, the new dress that was made came as—we had ruffles, three tiers, three tiers. Then they—they were showing it here too.

SIGRIST: What color?

ANTONOFF: It was a print. It is a blue print. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: Did—where did you have to go to get on the ship?

ANTONOFF: To get on the ship, [clears throat] we went to Warsaw, went to Gdansk, Gdansk.

SIGRIST: To Gdansk, and—

ANTONOFF: Gdansk.

SIGRIST: And how did you get from your town—

ANTONOFF: Gdansk.

SIGRIST: —to Gdansk.

ANTONOFF: From Warsaw? No, [unclear] from Warsaw. I don't know—

SIGRIST: Could be. But how did you get there? I mean, what—how—what conveyance did you use?

ANTONOFF: Well, to Warsaw we went by train. It was a train.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about the—the trip on the train going to the port?

ANTONOFF: No.

SIGRIST: Is it—

ANTONOFF: I—I know I—I was not happy. I was not happy to go.

SIGRIST: And who's traveling? Who—who's actually coming?

ANTONOFF: Mama with the four girls.

SIGRIST: I see. So it's mom and the four—

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —the four sisters.

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship?

ANTONOFF: The ship was Majestic. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: And you told me you remembered the line too.

ANTONOFF: Yeah, White Star Line.

SIGRIST: Great. What did you think when you saw the ship that you were about to get into?

ANTONOFF: First, we—we were on a small ship first. I think we got the Majestic in Gdansk. I—I don't know. We were on a small ship and then we went on the big ship.

SIGRIST: You had to get on a smaller ship to get on the big ship.

ANTONOFF: On a smaller ship to get on the big ship.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Had you ever been on a ship of any sort before?

ANTONOFF: No, no.

SIGRIST: What did you think when you had to get into the ship?

ANTONOFF: Oh, it was very exciting. It was very exciting. Then we stopped in Southampton, England. And the relatives came to see us.

SIGRIST: That's right. Part—your father's family—

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Members of your father's family?

ANTONOFF: In England.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ANTONOFF: Yeah, he had a lot of brothers there and nieces and nephews. And they all came to see us.

SIGRIST: Did you actually get off the ship in Southampton?

ANTONOFF: No, no. We were on the ship and they came and they brought—we spent a few hours together, a day together. [clears throat] No.

SIGRIST: How long did the ship take to get to New York?

ANTONOFF: The ship, it did—on the Majestic we were five days.

SIGRIST: Five days.

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And what sticks out in your mind about being on the ship?

ANTONOFF: Oh, I had a good time—we had a good time. We enjoyed it.

SIGRIST: Your mood has changed a bit. [chuckles]

ANTONOFF: Yeah! Oh, we enjoyed it. We met people and we sang. We're all a singing family. [chuckles] Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you sing?

ANTONOFF: We sang together—

SIGRIST: Do you remember—

ANTONOFF: —Jewish songs.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the songs that you used to sing?

ANTONOFF: [clears throat] Jewish songs and school songs, a lot the school—

SIGRIST: Can you sing the song that you used to sing?

ANTONOFF: [clears throat] I can't sing anymore. My voice—

SIGRIST: Oh.

ANTONOFF: But I used to sing in choruses.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ANTONOFF: My whole family sing—my father was a singer [unclear]. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: So you were on the Majestic for about five days, you said.

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you pulled into New York?

ANTONOFF: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: What happened once you got to New York?

ANTONOFF: Could I have come in without seeing—I don't remember seeing the Statue of Liberty.

SIGRIST: Oh, it's possible. Sure.

ANTONOFF: No.

SIGRIST: Well, what happened when the ship got to New York?

ANTONOFF: We were embarked—we—we were not detained in any way.

SIGRIST: That's right. You didn't have to come through Ellis Island.

ANTONOFF: No.

SIGRIST: No. So you—

ANTONOFF: And my father was there waiting for us with—with—with another couple friends that came to see us off.

SIGRIST: How did your father—

ANTONOFF: And [clears throat]—

SIGRIST: —look? When you saw him waiting for you and—and of course, you didn't know this man, as you said—

ANTONOFF: No, we knew him from pictures, from pictures. He sent us pictures.

SIGRIST: What did you think when you saw him?

ANTONOFF: He was a stranger. He—he was a stranger, actually. We had to develop some kind of feelings for him because he was a stranger and we hadn't—and in fact, one of my sisters actually, she held it against him that he left us. And I didn't have that feeling but I just had no love for him. Had to develop—he was, you know, trying. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: Do you remember—

ANTONOFF: And he was nervous. He was nervous. He was very nervous. Once we came in '29, the Depression started [clears throat] and he was working here. He worked in the—in the garment industry. And he

worked and he didn't work, you know, but it was very, you know, tried to save up the money he—you know, and to take—bring us over. So he was very nervous and here we came, four teenage girls. So he wanted to see us married as soon as we came here.

SIGRIST: [chuckles] Where—when you first met him, where did he take you when you got off the ship?

ANTONOFF: He had an apartment for us. He had a furnished apartment for us.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the apartment?

ANTONOFF: Nice apartment.

SIGRIST: Can you describe it?

ANTONOFF: Yeah, it was a nice apartment, two bedrooms.

SIGRIST: Where was it?

ANTONOFF: It was in—in Brooklyn, was called the—the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: Bronxville?

ANTONOFF: Brownsville.

SIGRIST: Brownsville.

ANTONOFF: Brownsville.

SIGRIST: The Brownsville section—

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —of Brooklyn.

ANTONOFF: [clears throat]

SIGRIST: You said two bedrooms.

ANTONOFF: Two bedrooms.

SIGRIST: Was it a house, an apartment? I mean, what was it?

ANTONOFF: Was a—a four-family house, upstairs, and nice, pretty modern. We lived there a few years.

SIGRIST: How was it compared to what you had come from in Poland?

ANTONOFF: Well, this was luxury. Ah!

SIGRIST: What did you have in this—

ANTONOFF: Was lux—oh, very impressed, very impr—I was very impressed with the apartment.

SIGRIST: Well, what impressed you? What did you have in this apartment that you didn't have in Poland?

ANTONOFF: [chuckles] We didn't have a bathroom. We had to go outside in an outhouse. We lived in one room and slept all together. And of course, food also was not plentiful. We were poor.

SIGRIST: You said your father was working in the garment industry.

ANTONOFF: Here.

SIGRIST: Doing what, exactly?

ANTONOFF: He was working on a operating machine on ladies sportswear, skirts and blouses, that.

SIGRIST: And when you arrived, were you expected to get a job?

ANTONOFF: We didn't know but we were made to understand that we have to get jobs.

SIGRIST: And did you—

ANTONOFF: Our father made us understand.

SIGRIST: Tell—tell me the first job that you got, that—

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —you were paid for.

ANTONOFF: I got a job. I got a job in a factory, also in the garment—you know, where you come at that time, so a landsleit. You heard of the word landsleit.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

ANTONOFF: [clears throat] Landsleit. L-A-N-D-S-L-E-I-T.

SIGRIST: And what is the landsleit?

ANTONOFF: Landsleit means people that come from the same town.

SIGRIST: Like a landsman.

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yes.

ANTONOFF: Landsman.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ANTONOFF: So—so the landsleit came and they took an interest and they—my father was connected and we—there's an organization of landsleit. So they were helping and helping get jobs and helping get established and, you know, were helping. So I got a job working in a factory sewing seams and coats, linings of coats [unclear].

SIGRIST: How much were you paid for that?

ANTONOFF: What was I [unclear]? [clears throat] Oh, \$5 a week, I think I earned.

SIGRIST: And what did do with your money?

ANTONOFF: Oh, gave it to home. Sure. Didn't keep the money. Gave it to the house.

SIGRIST: A—and were you a—were you allowed to keep some for yourself?

ANTONOFF: I don't think so. We gave it all and then—then Mom gave us a little spending—like, we have to go to the movies or something. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm. Can you talk to me about how you learned English?

ANTONOFF: I went to night school.

SIGRIST: What languages did you speak in Poland?

ANTONOFF: Polish and Yiddish.

SIGRIST: Polish and Yiddish.

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: All right. So you went to night school. Can you just—

ANTONOFF: Night school.

SIGRIST: —describe what that is for me?

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You know, what—

ANTONOFF: Yeah, night school. I learned fast because I had education in Poland. I was 16 and I—I had eight school—ei—eight—eight years—seven years of education. So it was easy for me to pick up.

SIGRIST: Do you remember some of the first words that you learned in English?

ANTONOFF: Yeah, the first words the teacher—the first sentence she teach—was teaching us, “Mind your business and let me mind mine.” [laughter] That’s classic. Then the things, “Step lively.” All these things that—everyday things. And then, of course, learned to read and write. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: What about your parents? Could they speak English?

ANTONOFF: No. My father spoke—he was here five years. My mother didn’t learn—yeah, a little bit.

SIGRIST: Can you talk to me a little bit about your mother’s adaptation to the United States?

ANTONOFF: Hmm.

SIGRIST: Because she’s obviously older and—

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How old was she when you arrived? Do you remember?

ANTONOFF: My mother might have been in her 40s.

SIGRIST: So tell me about maybe some of the—perhaps the difficulties she had.

ANTONOFF: She had difficulties, yes. She had difficulties with my father. He was different. She was—she was from a small town. She was religious and he was not. And there were difficulties. Yeah, she—not so good. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: Did she get a job?

ANTONOFF: No, no.

SIGRIST: Did she have any more children once they—

ANTONOFF: No.

SIGRIST: —came to the United States?

ANTONOFF: No. [sniffs] No.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Can you talk a little bit about if she made any friends or—or what her social life was?—

ANTONOFF: Well, [unclear]—yeah, the social life was the—the—the landsleit. Like, every Saturday they came over to visit because my father was very liked by the—much liked by the landsleit. He had contact with them and so they came over every Saturday to visit. Then my mother made things, you know.

SIGRIST: Was—

ANTONOFF: She baked cookies. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: I was going to ask, was there some—some ways that she held on to her Old World traditions here in the United States?

ANTONOFF: Well, her religion. I mean, she was not [unclear]. She was not able to keep this religious because my father was not. But she still kept a kosher house. My father mixed—mixed things up. [chuckles] He was not very tolerant of it. But she—

SIGRIST: Can you tell me—can you tell me what your family would do for fun in those days? For entertainment?

ANTONOFF: Yeah. They used to go to the Jewish theater. [clears throat] They did go to the Jewish theater [unclear].

SIGRIST: What—what do you remember about that?

ANTONOFF: There was Jewish theater in our area, even. Didn't have to go to Second Avenue. Even in our area there was a Jewish theater.
[clears throat]

SIGRIST: And what would you see at the Jewish theater?

ANTONOFF: All the—the—the stories, all the—the—the dramas there was about Europe, the sad life in Europe, the—the poor girl who had to slave at the machine and her boyfriend left her or [clears throat]—then such kind of stories, you know. Sad stories.

SIGRIST: And what language were—

ANTONOFF: Yiddish. Yiddish.

SIGRIST: And these were theatrical presentations. They were plays.

ANTONOFF: Theat—theatrical presentation in Yiddish, yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was there music involved in this too?

ANTONOFF: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, were musical. [clears throat] Yeah.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you didn't want to come to the United States, that—how did you feel once you got here?

ANTONOFF: Well, I didn't feel so good, except we came to the apartment, I was very impressed because was luxury. It was a beautiful apartment, comparison. It was nice. It was modern. So I was very impressed and we adjusted, you know. We adjusted.

SIGRIST: What was the one thing—

ANTONOFF: The four of us.

SIGRIST: —that was the most difficult for you to adjust to?

ANTONOFF: The language. The language. Felt very inferior, not knowing the language.

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

ANTONOFF: Oh, would have been dead because, soon after we left, Hitler started the Second World War. Soon after. And things changed in our town. When we were there it was still tol—you know, toler—tolerable. But as soon as we left it started. Hitler—Germany and the effect on the anti-Semitism and—and the time there, they went after the merchants, that [unclear], you know, had an effect. Things really got bad.

SIGRIST: We have two minutes left and I just want to get into your—

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —family life. What was the name of the man that you married?

ANTONOFF: Ben Antonoff.

SIGRIST: Ben. Benjamin.

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And—

ANTONOFF: Benjamin.

SIGRIST: —where was he born?

ANTONOFF: He was born in the Ukraine.

SIGRIST: And when did he come to the United States?

ANTONOFF: He came—he came from Canada. See, he—he was with the Spevaks. They—they were at the same time in Canada. He was in Can—he came in—also in '29 but he was in Canada.

SIGRIST: He came from the Ukraine to Canada—

ANTONOFF: Canada.

SIGRIST: —in 1929.

ANTONOFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And—

ANTONOFF: And then he came here.

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SIGRIST: When—what year did you get married?

ANTONOFF: In '34.

SIGRIST: In 1934. And how many children did you have?

ANTONOFF: Two.

SIGRIST: Two. Can you name them?

ANTONOFF: Two sons. Bernard and Jay.

SIGRIST: Jay. Well, great. Mrs. Antonoff, I want to thank you very much for letting me—

ANTONOFF: Very nice. Very nice.

SIGRIST: —whip you through your [laughs]—

ANTONOFF: I enjoyed it.

SIGRIST: —immigration history. This is Paul Sigris—

ANTONOFF: I enjoyed it, actually.

SIGRIST: Good. This is Paul Sigris signing off with Dinah Antonoff on Tuesday, May 20th, 1997 here at the Ellis Island Recording Studio. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]