**EI-985**
**RUTH ALPERT CAUGHERS**
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LEVINE: Today is March 15, 1998 and I'm here in Bangor, Northern Ireland. And I'm with Ruth Alpert Caughers, who is an American woman living in Northern Ireland. And her story is not about her personally, but rather about her maternal grandmother and her uncle. Okay. Well, if you would start by maybe saying your birth date and how long you've been here in Northern Ireland.

CAUGHERS: Right. I was born on the 7th of December, 1951 and I have been here for 23 years, living in Northern Ireland.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And how was it that you came to Northern Ireland?

CAUGHERS: I came to work with handicapped children for one year. But I—I loved it here so much I—I didn't go back. So I've made my life here and I'm very happy living in Northern Ireland.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And now, how is it that you happened—you must have seen the article in the newspaper.

CAUGHERS: My husband saw the article in the paper and, unbeknown to me, he phoned [chuckles] in, telling a sketchy version of my family's story. And then I was contacted—

LEVINE: Okay.

CAUGHERS: —later on.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, where—when, approximately, does the story start?

CAUGHERS: The story would begin somewhere around the time of the First World War in Poland in a small village called Chelm—C-H-E-L-M, which has been made famous by the author, Isaac Boshovish Singer, [PH] because he also came from that—

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAUGHERS: So many people have come to hear of this small village. And my grandparents were living there, just newly married with a—a—a child on the way. And because my grandfather was Jewish, apparently the Jewish men were taking—taken into the army and held indefinitely. They—they had to serve without any knowledge of when they would be released or whatever. And I think there were enough horror stories about what—what happened and whatever that they decided that they should probably think of leaving. But they hadn't enough money for them all to leave. So the plan was that my grandfather would basically escape [chuckles] service, go to America, work and make enough money to send for my grandmother and the child. That was the plan. And so he left. My grandmother was left with a—a small child. In fact, another child was born. She had one child. I'm sorry. Beg your pardon. She had a little boy. And during the time my grandfather was away, another child was born and then died very soon after. And my grandmother was left, really—was—the war had begun and they were struggling very much for her livelihood. And I think there was a lot of—I think she actually survived by selling things on the black market, cigarettes and sort of luxury items, different things. And my grandfather had left an address where he could be reached in New York. And he promised, of course, to let her know as soon as he arrived or such. But what he didn't know was that the boat that he was on was not allowed to land in New York, for whatever reason, the quota had been exceeded or whatever. He never—they were never told. Just—the boat just went off. And they—they were let off in Texas, [chuckles] which was quite a shock, obviously, and all his plans down the drain. So he—he was trying—his plan was then to work his way back up to New York so

there could be this—you know, he had an address somewhere. He held onto this address. I don't know who it was or what the contact was. But he did have an address. And he started his way up from Texas, working. And basically, it took him nearly 10 years. He never—he stopped in Nebraska and realized that it was pretty futile, this rate. So he would just settle in one place, try to earn enough money to send for my grandmother. Meanwhile, she had not received any of the letters that he had sent, knew nothing about what had happened to him. She had no luck when she tried to contact the address that—that he had given her. And basically, she was on her own with a little boy to raise for 10 years with very little, you know, knowledge of what was—what had been happening. And 10 years later, a—a letter arrived with a ticket saying, "Meet me in New York." She was, of course, overjoyed. And she set off with her 10-year-old son and they arrived in—well, maybe I should say that, because times had been so hard for them, and the boy and his mother, of course, had always been quite close together. You know, they had—really only had each other, and very, very close. During the whole sailing across the Atlantic, because they had had very little food, he always—my grandmother didn't know, but he was keeping the—his rations, his bread, sort of stuffing his pockets with them, putting them in a—in his little case and thinking, you know, he would just eat a little bit. But because they'd been so hungry, you know, that he would have saved some for—if there was nothing on the other end, not knowing what they were going to and having no idea, you know, what they would find. And they arrived in Ellis Island and the first thing that my uncle saw were the uniforms. And he had had the experience with men in uniforms, soldiers during the war and was terrified, absolutely terrified the minute he saw the uniforms. And he clammed up. They were—when they were questioned and examined, obviously they were put through kind of medical examinations. And my grandmother always said, you know, that they—they were terrified. They all knew on the boat that if they were—they were found to have anything wrong, physical or mental deficiency, they would be sent back. That's what they all knew. But, you know, if—no coughing, no sneezing, no nothing. You know, that if—[sniffs] this would be very dangerous. So—but seeing the uniforms, he clammed up, My Uncle Max, and therefore, didn't answer any of the questions and just stood frozen. And it got to the stage where whoever was examining him said to my grandmother, "What's wrong with him? He's—is something wrong with him? Is he deaf? Is he dumb? Is he stupid? Is he mentally ill?" Whatever. And he—she tried to coax him and, you know, I always, as a child, imagined this scene of desperation, you know. And in the end, she just picked up her bag and started beating him over the head [chuckles] till he screamed and shouted, "Leave me alone! What are

you doing?" You know. And he started talking and everything and then they said, "He's obviously all right." [laughter] And they let them through. But this moment of—you know, I've always been very struck by this moment of terror, you know, thinking, you know, would they be turned back? And they had nothing to go to back to, you know. Anyway, they—eventually, my grandfather was there.

LEVINE: At Ellis Island?

CAUGHERS: At Ellis I—well, somewhere in New York there, and met the boat and they were reunited. It was just—yes.

LEVINE: And do you know anything about the—their later life in New York? Or did they stay in New York?

CAUGHERS: They went back to Nebraska. They went straight back. My grandfather had set up a woodturning business. He was a wood turner.

LEVINE: And then what had he done in Poland?

CAUGHERS: I don't know.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAUGHERS: I actually don't know. He was very young, you know, in—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAUGHERS: You know, young—

LEVINE: So he might not have had a—

CAUGHERS: —man at the time. He may not have—

LEVINE: Right, right.

CAUGHERS: I don't know. But for the rest of his life, he had a woodturning shop and his—his other son did. They—the sad part of the story is that my uncle never adjusted to his life and to his father. He had met a man that he never knew and, you know, sort of vying for my grandmother's attention. And their life was—I mean, it was such a—such a difference. And he never really adapted.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAUGHERS: And six years later, he ran away—

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAUGHERS: —and was never heard of again.

LEVINE: Really?

CAUGHERS: Yeah, it's very sad. Very sad—

LEVINE: Yeah.

CAUGHERS: —part of our family story, you know. When we were children, we always—whenever we got together, you know, we—we always said, "We'll find Uncle Max."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAUGHERS: You know, "We'll go and find him." But nobody ever heard of him again.

LEVINE: And of course, he couldn't go back to Poland.

CAUGHERS: No.

LEVINE: Nobody did that.

CAUGHERS: No. He was—he was spotted as—in Canada. My grandfather sent private detectives and, you know, they searched for years—

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAUGHERS: —and years, you know. And they found that he had been living in Canada. He had apparently joined the RAF.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAUGHERS: And—but there was no trace and never has been.

LEVINE: Now, so he was about 16 when he left?

CAUGHERS: He left at 16. It was a big—

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAUGHERS: —argument in the family or something. He and my grandfather just were never able, really, to establish the kind of relationship, which would have been normal.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAUGHERS: You know, they tried and then they went—of course, and they had more children. They had three more children. You know, there's—their life became very normal—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAUGHERS: Ordinary, you know. Raising a family, working. And—

LEVINE: Wow.

CAUGHERS: —they never really—he never adjusted.

LEVINE: Now, that's one of the sides of the immigration picture—

CAUGHERS: Yeah.

LEVINE: —that—that is not often brought out—

CAUGHERS: Yeah.

LEVINE: —although it happened a lot, I think—

CAUGHERS: Yeah, I'm sure.

LEVINE: —that families were simply not the same as they had been. And—and there were a lot of breakups of families—

CAUGHERS: Yeah.

LEVINE: —in one way or another.

CAUGHERS: Yeah. And my grandmother—I always remember this image that was told to me and which I actually witnessed, [chuckles] that apparently, every Mother's Day she sat by the phone.

LEVINE: Oh.

CAUGHERS: Just waited. Very sad.

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm, hmm. So they had—they had a very hard life together before they actually—

CAUGHERS: Yes.

LEVINE: —left.

CAUGHERS: Yes. But their life in America was a very fortunate one. I mean, they did—my grandfather did very well and they had, you know, a very happy family. My mother's memories are of being blissfully happy, lovely childhood, very normal, having plenty, never wanting for anything.

LEVINE: So your mother was one of the younger children?

CAUGHERS: She was the youngest.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAUGHERS: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAUGHERS: She was the youngest.

LEVINE: And do you, personally, remember your—your grandmother?

CAUGHERS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We used to make these long treks across the country to Nebraska every year, and they came. Oh, yes. Very much so.

LEVINE: And did you remember your Uncle Max? I mean firsthand?

CAUGHERS: No, no. No.

LEVINE: Oh, well. He was 16 so—

CAUGHERS: Yes.

LEVINE: Right.

CAUGHERS: No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAUGHERS: My mother was—I think my mother was maybe—I don't even know. She was old enough to have remembered him but she remembers, you know, a lot of conflict.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

CAUGHERS: You know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Right, right. Yeah. Wow. Well, is there anything else about that immigration experience, the effect it had on—on anybody or anything else that you sort of—part—is part of your family legend of the whole event? I mean, I guess your mother remembers some of it firsthand. I mean, not the immigration experience but the family life after that.

CAUGHERS: I—basically, they—they kind of carried on their lives much as they had, or would have done had there not been the political situation in Europe, you know. I mean, the—the Jewish villages and the Jewish communities, I think, were very, very insular. And they, you know, had a certain way of, you know, celebrating the festivals and living their lives. And it seemed to be—you know, many people don't realize [laughs]—are always surprised when they hear I came—my mother came from Nebraska because they always say, "Jewish people in Nebraska?" You know, there's a very big Jewish community there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAUGHERS: So they had that—say—it sounded to me that they just sort of carried on their lives as they would have had they not left, you know, doing something—

LEVINE: Were they a religious family?

CAUGHERS: Yes, yes. Not orthodox but, yes, religious.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAUGHERS: Yes.

LEVINE: And—and so there was this community that—that was in Nebraska?

CAUGHERS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yes, very strong.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAUGHERS: Yeah. And, yeah, I think basically they just sort of transported, you know, their lives from one country to the next. I think the hardest, certainly, was, you know, those years of uncertainty and when they lived in Chelm and—and of course, they—they left before the Second World War, which meant they escaped all of that side of the thing, you know, the Nazis and whatever, although I know that my grandmother's family refused to leave. They kept saying, "It'll never happen." You know, certain—"We've lived here all our lives." Then my grandmother, I know, wrote to her sisters and her mother begging to come to America before the war broke out, before it was too late. And they wouldn't listen and they all died.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAUGHERS: So that was a great—you know, I'm sure that was a terrible thing for her too.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAUGHERS: But there was certainly nothing about either my grandmother or my grandfather that would—would show that, you know, they—anything but that—but that they were very happy people, very—

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAUGHERS: Yeah. My grandfather was a real jokester, you know, and—you know, they didn't look like people who had suffered a lot. But I think you very often find that. You know, the ones who have actually been through the ordeal—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAUGHERS: Very often people that are good natured and—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAUGHERS: —you know.

LEVINE: Did—did—did—do you know anything about the community in—in Nebraska? I mean, it was an insular community, would you say or—

CAUGHERS: I think—

LEVINE: Do you know anything about that?

CAUGHERS: Not really. I think it's—you know, from my own experience, even as a child, it's—would seem to me just like any other small Jewish community. I mean, when I say that there were Jews in Nebraska, there certainly weren't a lot of them so they stuck together, I would say.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

CAUGHERS: But I don't know if any of the others had had that—any similar experiences, you know, that they'd come from Europe. My memory as a child is that I didn't know anybody older than my parents who spoke with an American accent. Everybody had a foreign accent.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAUGHERS: I still, you know, hear the chatter behind me as—in foreign accents, you know.

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm. Wow. Well, if there's nothing else you can remember, I mean, I think that's—that's a wonderful story that—that we'll welcome into the Oral History Archive at Ellis Island. And it's interesting, the distinction between the firsthand accounts and the sort of family legend accounts, which are—I—you have to be somewhat different.

CAUGHERS: Hmm.

LEVINE: But, well, anyway, I really appreciate your coming and being interviewed.

CAUGHERS: Good. Thank you.

LEVINE: Yeah, thank you.

CAUGHERS: Yeah.

LEVINE: I've been speaking with Ru—Ruth Caughers, who is here in Northern Ireland, an immigrant of sorts yourself, although you retain your American citizenship.

CAUGHERS: Yes. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]