

KECK-001

OSCAR KLEINMAN

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AGE 11

PASSAGE ON "THE ZEELAND"

APPLEBOME: This is Edward Applebome and I am speaking with Oscar Kleinman on Wednesday, January 16, 1985. We are beginning this interview at 10 AM. We are about to interview Mr. Kleinman about his immigration experience from Poland in 1921. First, Mr. Kleinman, could you tell us where and when you were born?

KLEINMAN: I was born in Bialystock on January 25, 1910.

APPLEBOME: That's Bialystock, Poland.

KLEINMAN: That's Bialystock, Poland, right.

APPLEBOME: Do you have memories of what life was like in your native country?

KLEINMAN: Well, keeping in mind that I was a young child in my native country, uh, I remember of course where we lived, I remember the street vividly where I was brought up in a house. Uh, we lived . . . While there were many Jewish people who lived in Bialystock City, it was, it had a large Jewish population. Uh, we lived on a street that was populated mostly by Polish people and we had Polish neighbors all around us and, uh, I went to school, I started going first to Hebrew school and I went to Hebrew school . . . I started at age six and I went until I was about eight-and-a-half or nine, uh, and then I was enrolled in regular school, um, which they called the "gymnasia." In there you start the gymnasia, uh, you have to prepare for it and be ready to go into what would be about the equivalent of the third grade here. That you do by private tutoring. Uh, we left Poland in 1920. Um, my brother and sister left the year before and, uh, then the rest of the family, which consisted of my mother and father and two sisters and myself, left in December of 1920. Um, what prompted us to leave Poland was because, of course, we were involved,

that is Poland, which before it became Poland was Russia, and before Russia we were occupied by the Germans for four years from 1914 to 1918. So it was a state of, especially for Jewish people, it was a state of where people were not comfortable. They wanted to get out. It was that kind of situation. Um, because originally when I was born it was Russia, that is czarist Russia. And then the Germans came in and occupied it for four years, the Poles were reinstated as an independent nation, and then after they were instituted as an independent nation, they had the Russian Revolution, which was very ripe in deep Russia, and the Communists, or Bolsheviks, as they were called at that time, started fighting with the Poles and they drove them out, and they occupied Bialystock. So we were swinging from every direction as far nationalities. Uh . . .

APPLEBOME: Did you see fighting in your town?

KLEINMAN: Oh, yes, yes. There was fighting in the town. As a matter of fact, uh, when the Bolsheviks were fighting, were coming in, we lived let's say about a mile or so or two miles from a railroad track and

they had an armored train that was firing into the city. Right outside our window there was a big oak tree and the Poles mounted a, uh, a machine gun firing at the train. So while this was going on we all had to lay low on the floor, you know, because there were shells coming from all around. So there was a lot of fighting going on. And of course once the Poles were driven out then the Bolsheviks came in. They were, they treated the Jewish people better than the Poles did. However, there were, that wasn't a panacea either. And then the Poles came back in, again there was fighting, and all the fighting was within the City itself and you know people, of course, protected themselves as best they can by going down into cellars if they had cellars, or laying on the floor, uh, low down. Because when, after fighting was over I remember going out with my father and picking up empty shells, you know, which from the machine gun, which were flying all around.

So, uh, we were very glad when we finally received our visas and were permitted to leave.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember the details of how the application was made for the visa?

APPLEBOME: No, that I don't, because that was handled by my parents, I mean, and, uh, all I know is that they received the visa and we finally made arrangement to leave and we left Bialystock by railroad train and, uh, then we entered, left Poland via Danzig, which is Gdansk, now they call it Gdansk. Uh, and from there we travelled by railroad, uh, through Berlin and through Germany into Belgium and Antwerp where we departed from there. Um, I would say about, I don't remember the exact date, but I would say it must have been around the 12th or thereabouts of January.

APPLEBOME: That, that was January of 1921.

KLEINMAN: Of 1921, right. We departed in December of 1920.

APPLEBOME: Do you have memories of that train trip?

KLEINMAN: Not too vivid, because the trains, as you, uh, the Europeans at that time, I don't, it's different from what they are today. They were crowded, there were people jammed in, and too much memory of the train trip I don't have, no. My memory is finally of arriving into Antwerp. And we stayed somewhere like a, it wasn't a hotel, it was a place where

immigrants were lodged, and you didn't have separate rooms, they lodged you, the men, separately, the women separately, you, you slept in large rooms, all the men together, all the women together. You ate all together in a large dining room, you know.

APPLEBOME: So you were able to stay with your father then?

KLEINMAN: Oh, yeah, I was with my father, right. And then we departed from Antwerp on a ship which was called the New Zealand [sic, Zeeland]. It was . . .

APPLEBOME: Spelling on that?

KLEINMAN: Well, "New," of course, you know the spelling. Zeeland was capital Z double E-L-A-N-D. Um, it was, it was a ship used primarily for carrying immigrants from Europe to the United States. And, uh, mostly it was, the ship itself as I recall was very large. Um, I remember having a meal there on the ship, which was on a Friday night, and they fed us fish. And right after that we must have had stormy weather and everybody got sick, me amongst them. And for years after that I wouldn't eat any fish. So that's a vivid memory that I have.

APPLEBOME: What kind of accommodations did you have on the boat?

KLEINMAN: Well, again it was the usual type of accommodations that all immigrants that came to the United States had. It was, uh, it was what they'd call third class but, uh, people were again put in, separated by, men separately, women separately, they slept in large rooms with, if I recall there were three bunks, one on top of the other, or maybe four bunks, I don't remember. But I remember, you know. And the voyage was rather rough and most of the people including, I imagine, myself, although I don't recall that, didn't feel good during the whole trip and spent most of their time in their bunks.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember if you met any people on the trip over?

KLEINMAN: No, I don't. I don't remember meeting any people, however I do remember when finally the weather subsided somewhat and we were able to go up on deck, I remember looking up and seeing what was known as the second class or first class passengers up above us, you know. But that's about all that I can

really remember about the boat trip.

APPLEBOME: Did you get to see your mother and sister during the trip?

KLEINMAN: Oh, sure, oh, sure, I mean, you were only separated for sleeping purposes, that's all. You ate together, you, and of course you spent your time with your family. The only thing is that you had separate accommodations for sleeping because the room, even on the boat for sleeping was large and accommodated maybe twenty people or more in the room, with triple bunks layered one on top of the other.

APPLEBOME: What kind of baggage were you travelling with?

KLEINMAN: Well, we had our clothes with us. I remember my mother taking bedding with her. We carried a lot of, oh, a samovar, which we brought over from, from Europe. We carried a lot of utensils with us. It was quite a bit of baggage, you know. The baggage, of course, was all packed in, not in travelling bags like we travel with today, but was packed in trunks. You know, that was the usual way of travelling by boat, so.

APPLEBOME: So how long do you think the trip took in total?

KLEINMAN: I would say that as far as I remember the trip itself must have taken at least fifteen to sixteen days to make the crossing. And, uh, we must have departed before the 12th of January because if it took fifteen days and we arrived here on the 21st of January, that I remember, so we must have departed probably around the 5th or 6th of January with the boat from Antwerp.

APPLEBOME: Okay, so you got to New York Harbor. Do you remember pulling in?

KLEINMAN: We got to New York Harbor. I remember the boat anchoring. I remember, uh, tugboats coming along side. And many, and family members were allowed to go on the tugboats. And, and I remember a cousin of mine was on the tugboat. My older brother and the, because we saw them from the boat, you know, and they just came to the sea, you know. And then from the boat we were taken off into Ellis Island. And Ellis Island, we all went through physical exams. I recall that. And I recall the doctors examining me and everybody. Um, and Poland my father was

suffering from, he had a cough, and he probably had a touch of, uh, well, I don't know whether he had any temperature or not, but in any ways, they held us back for approximately a week's time until they made sure that he was physically okay and we were permitted to leave Ellis Island.

APPLEBOME: Your mother and sister also?

KLEINMAN: My mother and two sisters, yeah. We all stayed there while my father was there. Because what they did is, I believe, is they isolated my father to check him through.

APPLEBOME: What kind of room did you stay in on Ellis Island?

KLEINMAN: Well, the rooms in Ellis Island, as I recall, again, I remember the white walls. They were at, uh, all the rooms were, they weren't painted white. They had the, uh, ceramic tiles. It was all tiled walls. There were large rooms and again the men and women were separated and they slept in separate rooms. And if I recall right, even there, the beds were in bunks types, in other words, layers of, also probably three high or so. So, uh, 'cause there were many people at Ellis Island there. A lot, a

lot of people were there.

APPLEBOME: Did you meet any of them?

KLEINMAN: I'm sure I did, but I don't remember any of them.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember anything about the meals that were served to you or what you did there during the day?

KLEINMAN: Well, we were served meals, again, in a, in a public dining room. Long tables with long benches and, uh, the meals were satisfactory. I mean, they're not meals that I would call today "gourmet" but I remember not being dissatisfied with the meals. The meals were all right. They were good.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember how you felt about having to stay on Ellis Island for those extra days or how your parents felt?

KLEINMAN: Not, not, well, of course, we were a little bit concerned, you know, because that we were being held back. Most everybody else were allowed to go off, and, uh, when finally we were notified that it was all right for us to leave, and my brother and sister, and sisters who were over here at the time, were at Ellis Island. They were there to meet us as

we got off Ellis Island. 'Cause we got on a boat to get across and I remember from there going to a subway. My first ride in a subway.

APPLEBOME: Just to back up for a second, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you came?

KLEINMAN: Oh, yeah, I remember seeing the Statue of Liberty. That, of course, everybody was at the rails looking at that. You know, that was something that we all became aware of even before we arrived, that that would be one of the first sights we would see.

APPLEBOME: What had you heard about the United States before you came over?

KLEINMAN: Well, what I heard was, of course, based on that I had my brother and sister who had come over the year before. I had two other sisters who had come here, uh, maybe ten years prior to that. And, and, you know, we heard it was a country where there was freedom and being Jewish you weren't, didn't have to be afraid that pogroms, and of, and of situations where you were mistreated and so on and so forth. And that was primarily one of the primary reasons we came here. Because of the freedom that you obtained

here. Just to back up a little bit, I remember vividly the night we were leaving our house that was already, the country, Poland, Bialystock was already back in Polish hands. and, and there was a raid on our house by Polish soldiers and everything in the house was emptied. The only thing left there was a closet and all the papers and whatever money we had was all laying in the shelf in the closet and as soon as we saw it happening my older sister grabbed it and hid it on herself. And I remember running out through the back and there were soldiers, men all around the house. And I ran into a neighbor's house, who was a Polish neighbor, and the son-in-law, who was a colonel in the Polish Army, happened to be there and he came over. And he said that he wasn't even sure that they were regular soldiers. But he himself was not sure that they were gonna, you know, attack him. That was the situation. So when you ask why we left, that's an example of why we left. It was very common. And they had evidently knew that we were leaving and they figured they'd come in and get whatever they could. So . . .

APPLEBOME: Were other people in your village, well, you said your older brother and sister, I think already had left.

KLEINMAN: Right, had left earlier.

APPLEBOME: Were other people leaving that you knew of?

KLEINMAN: Oh, yes, there were other people that came over approximately either a year before or within a couple of years afterwards. Many people came over from Bialystock. In fact, my, uh, brother-in-law, who is married to my older sister, he was a neighbor of ours and he came over I think about the same time we did. Unfortunately his family didn't come over and they were all killed in the Holocaust. Not all of them, some of them escaped to Israel, but the majority of them were killed. So the reason why people at that time were immigrating to the United States was that living in Russia, Poland, and later years Germany, because during the years when I was small Germany was, was not an anti-Semitic country. It was during Hitler's time that they became that way.

APPLEBOME: So after your stay on Ellis Island, well, first of

all, are there any more details you can tell us about from the time you were on Ellis Island?

KLEINMAN: Well, on Ellis Island I remember the small rooms. There were a lot of small rooms and then there were some large rooms which were the dormitories, you know, where people slept. Large dining rooms. Uh, I remember the people who worked there. They were all very nice to the immigrants. I remember that when we had to stay over they reassured us, you know, not to worry, you know.

APPLEBOME: What language did you speak with them?

KLEINMAN: Well, what language, it wasn't English, although I had started to learn English in school before I left. I didn't know enough to speak it yet. The languages we spoke were Yiddish, polish, german and Russian. And there were people there that spoke some Yiddish, some Polish, some German, you know, there were people who worked there that knew other languages.

APPLEBOME: Were there any, any social services on the Island that were helping you out?

KLEINMAN: I'd imagine that the people who tried to reassure us were the social services that were there. I, I can't be aware of that, though. As I said, I was, the day I left Ellis Island was my birthday, so, um . . .

APPLEBOME: Okay, that was, was it your eleventh birthday?

KLEINMAN: That was my eleventh birthday, right, the day I left Ellis Island.

APPLEBOME: So that should be a memorable day.

APPLEBOME: That I remember, right. So, uh . . .

APPLEBOME: Had anything been done to celebrate your birthday?

KLEINMAN: Not that I remember, not that I remember, but, you know, I was, uh, I was aware it was my birthday and I assumed that my mother and my father made me aware of it.

APPLEBOME: So you travelled from Ellis Island to . . .

KLEINMAN: From Ellis Island, well, actually we travelled from Ellis Island, we took a subway train, whether we had to change or not I don't remember, but we travelled to Brooklyn where my oldest sister lived. And

we . . .

APPLEBOME: Had your brother or sister met you to help you out?

KLEINMAN: Oh, yes, oh, yes, there, my family met us, you know, they were with us after we got off Ellis Island. And they took us to their house in, in Brooklyn. I remember the street. Of course, I stayed there for not long.

APPLEBOME: Where was that?

KLEINMAN: Herkimer Street. Do you know that street?

APPLEBOME: No. What part of Brooklyn is it in?

KLEINMAN: What part of Brooklyn, that's a good question. I only stayed and lived there for four months and then moved to the Bronx. I imagine it was part of Flatbush or that part. And from there we moved to the Bronx, Bathgate Avenue.

APPLEBOME: Bathgate Avenue I know.

APPLEBOME: Do you know Bathgate Avenue? And we lived in the Bronx for all the years that I grew up and went to school.

APPLEBOME: What did your family do when you got here?

KLEINMAN: Well, my older sisters all went to work and went to school. My brother went to work and went to school. I went to school. My younger sister went to school. And, uh, that's really the story as far as it goes, as far as Ellis Island and my coming over here.

APPLEBOME: What kind of work did your father do?

KLEINMAN: Well, he was in the, uh, he didn't do any work here when he got here because he wasn't a well man. And before that he was in the, uh, manufacturing business in Bialystock.

APPLEBOME: What kind of manufacturing?

KLEINMAN: Uh, material, you know, they had looms, factories that made material.

APPLEBOME: So when he came here he wasn't able to work. So how did your family support itself?

KLEINMAN: Well, my, as I said, my brother and two sisters went to work and they helped support the family and, uh, I started working while I was going to school, after

school.

APPLEBOME: What are your memories of that?

KLEINMAN: Well, I remember having first a job as a delivery boy for a grocery store, later on as a delivery boy for a drug store. And later on I worked for a wholesale druggist delivering packages to drug stores, you know, as he got orders. And during all those years I was, of course, going to school.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

APPLEBOME: This is the second side of Tape One of the interview with Mr. Oscar Kleinman. So, Mr. Kleinman, we were talking about after your family had arrived in the United States and you went to school and you were also doing work after school.

APPLEBOME: Yes, I worked after school. I, uh, just very briefly, I went through public school and then high school, Evanderchild's High School, and, uh, then I went to college. I went there for about a year to City College, and then I started going to NYU Engineering School at night, and my last year I did

NYU day school up at University Heights and got my degree in Engineering. And that's basically as far as my education went. Um, did you want to go back to Ellis Island?

APPLEBOME: Okay, well, just first, if you can speak about that, your family was here. How did it fulfill their expectations?

APPLEBOME: Well, my family's expectations, of course it was rough, you know, getting, first of all getting acclimated to a new country, to a new way of life, uh, my two sisters, and that is my two sisters who were older than me, went to work as seamstresses, working on dresses. My brother worked and he became a furrier. And, uh, it was rough going. I mean, it wasn't a life of leisure. It wasn't a life of luxury. Uh, we all had to work. We knew that.

APPLEBOME: What type of housing did you have?

KLEINMAN: Well, we lived in, um, in apartments. We lived, uh, probably, let's see, we lived, as I said, for about four months in, in, uh, Brooklyn. After that, uh, we lived, we moved to Bathgate Avenue in the Bronx, and, uh, we lived there together with my sister who

had come here long before we did. She was married and we had an apartment house, we. I never lived in a cold water flat. The apartments were steam heated. You know, we lived, I believe, on the second or third floor. It was a five-room apartment.

APPLEBOME: How did it compare to the comforts you had in Bialystock?

KLEINMAN: Well, in Bialystock we lived in a house. It wasn't a big house. It was a small house. But the comforts, of course, were much, much better, uh, here than in Bialystock. We didn't, I mean, the kind of kitchens that even those apartments that, uh, Bathgate Avenue had were deluxe compared to what Bialystock had. We didn't have, uh, private bathrooms in Bialystock. Uh, actually, we had outhouses, you know. Uh, so the comfort of living was much, much greater here than in Bialystock. And from Bathgate Avenue we moved to Tremont Avenue and, uh, then Prospect Avenue. We lived in, I don't know, a half a dozen different places. And, uh, until my last address was on West Tremont Avenue, uh, 66 West Tremont Avenue before I was called to

active duty during the War.

APPLEBOME: I understand that two years ago, was it, you took a trip to Ellis Island?

KLEINMAN: Yes, two years ago my wife and I thought we'd go down and visit Ellis Island and, uh, we found it, I found it personally, since I had come through there, where it's like going back to an old house that you had lived in. Uh, that was the, uh, memory that I had. Uh, in other words, if I were to go back, let's say, uh, visit Bialystock and go to the house where I lived in, where which even today I can visualize it, even though I was small at the time, uh, I think I would find my way around it. That's the way I felt about visiting Ellis Island. Like, uh, visiting the first house I was in. So it was a good memory.

APPLEBOME: That's very nice.

KLEINMAN: And I kept pointing out to my wife, who had never been there, or I don't think she had been there before, she, she didn't come from Europe, she was born here. Uh, pointing out, uh, especially the tile walls. I remember the small cubicle rooms that

were offices or wherever the people worked. I remember, you know, I was a small kid, you know, I didn't stay put, uh, while I was there. So I roamed around and I remember all those various places. And it jogged my memory to a great extent.

APPLEBOME: Could you talk about that a little more?

KLEINMAN: Well, uh, as I walked through I remember pointing out to my wife, uh, places that, I said, "Oh, I remember this, and I remember the dining room." Uh, the place was in, well, it was in disarray when I visited it because it hadn't been used for years, but still people, numerous people came there to visit. And, uh, and they had, I believe they had a tour. Uh, the, uh, the Department of the Interior, which supervised it, had, uh, tour guides, you know. And they took people through and they explained, we went up the steps and down the steps and they showed all the different places. And every place I had been I said, "Oh, this is a place I remember," you know, I had been here. So it was all a matter of remembering and seeing, uh, like being in an old home again, you know. There's what was the kind of memory because this was the first place that I

actually landed in the United States. Or what we called America, you know.

APPLEBOME: So while you were there during the day you were able to really roam around?

KLEINMAN: During the day we were able, at least I, I remember that I roamed around because I remembered all these little rooms that I saw. We weren't confined in any way. Uh, although I remember that they had some fencing in the area, you know, but, uh, and, uh, which still existed when we saw, when we visited there two years ago or thereabouts. So it was a good memory. I enjoyed it. And, in fact, when I came back I told my children about it and I urged them to go see it, which they did.

APPLEBOME: Did you discuss it with them?

KLEINMAN: Yes, yes, they were very interested in it. But, uh, I'm very happy that they're, uh, repairing it and making it a museum of sorts because literally thousands and thousands of people came through there. It was the first introduction that people had with the United States. So I think it was a good memory.

APPLEBOME: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

KLEINMAN: I don't know whether there's much more that I can tell you, really, you know, I mean, uh, most of the people that have come over that I, that I, uh, well, there were none of my friends that I went to school with over in Bialystock came over here. So I hadn't, I haven't seen, except, uh, I know, uh, that some of their relatives came over and so on, but none of the children or the kids that I went to school with do I recall coming over here. Some of them, I believe, went to Israel. Because everybody was looking to get out of Poland. That is every, every Jew that could get out went out. And they either emigrated, if they could get visas to get into the United States they emigrated to the United States, and otherwise, uh, like my uncle, cousins, and so on, went in to Russia where it was better for them than living with under the Polish domination.

APPLEBOME: Thank you very much. This concludes the interview with Mr. Oscar Kleinman. It's 11:45. Thank you.

KLEINMAN: Okay.