KECK-104
MARIA VLADIMIRNA SISOYAVA OOGJEN
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RUSSIA, 1923
AGE 15
PASSAGE ON "THE SAMLAND"

DANE: This is Debby Dane, and I'm speaking with Maria Oogjen on Friday, December 20, 1985. We're beginning the interview at 10:00 AM. We're about to interview Maria Oogjen, Oogjen--

OOGJEN: Oogjen.

DANE: Oogjen. It's Oogjen, about her immigration experience from Russia in 1923. She was fifteen years old and her number in the archives is 104. What day were you born and where were you born? We'll start at the beginning.

OOGJEN: Uh, I was born on July 22nd, 1908 in the city of Petrovsk, Russia.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. What kind of town was Petrovsk? Was it a small village?

OOGJEN: Petrovsk was a, a small city, which contained seven churches. And it

was an island city composed of two islands, a small island and a large island. And the island was surrounded by a river which was called the Bear River.

DANE: What did people do there for a living? Was it a bustling town, were there farmers?

OOGJEN: Uh, once a week we had a, a square, uh, where farmers would bring their wares to sell. Cattle, homemade furniture, uh, products such as potatoes, vegetables, fruit, and there were stalls which would open up and they would sell yard goods, laces, perfumes and, uh, a variety of home needs for housewives and their families.

DANE: Uh-huh. And your mother, did she have a job?

OOGJEN: Oh, no. My mother was a homebody. She loved her, her home. And very few women worked outside the home in that, at that time. They were, they were mostly housekeepers, cooks, and raised their children, and they sewed for the children, and they baked, and they cleaned, and they washed clothes, and various tasks requiring a mother's care.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. In your family you had two older brothers?

OOGJEN: I had two teenage brothers, aged fifteen, fourteen, and I had just recently turned, became a teen, age thirteen. And then there was my mother.

DANE: Your father had come to this country when you were how old?

OOGJEN: Uh, I seem to think that I was younger than six, because my recollection of him was so vague. But I do have remembrances such as he driving a bicycle

on a cobblestone square and myself sitting on the handlebar on a pillow. The other instance in which I remember my father was teaching me to spoon soup, that I should lean over. The third recollection, which is quite vivid, is a Christmas party at our home when our friends were invited. A tree, a sizable tree, would be all decorated with toys and a star and gold leaf covered nuts and paper wrapped candy hanging, and paper chains. And underneath would be the gifts which were not of clothing or, um, or toys. There would be brown bags all around the tree, and there would be apples and nuts and candy, and were given to the children at the end of the party. The children, in turn performed. We would join hands around the tree and go around and sing Christmas songs, laying about the Christmas tree. There was no Santa Claus giving out gifts. There was a St. Nicholas, but he was not required to be present at the Christmas parties, to give our friends. It was most of a Christmas holiday. (A telephone rings in the background.) (Break in tape.)

DANE: Okay. We were just talking about Christmas but, I suppose, your story's such a good one we should get right into the time when your father left.

OOGJEN: Um, I do not remember. It seems that all of us, all it was, there were just four of us. The only thing we know, or knew, was what my mother told us, that father had gone, presumably, to America, to make a better living, perhaps set up a business, and then send for us. And for nine years our little family took care of each other. My mother's relatives were very supportive in every respect. Uncle Vysa visited us. He visited often. He would ask mother if she needed anything. He would check on my brothers to see if they behaved. And if I felt lonely he would take me home with him to play with his three daughters, the younger ones in particular. And in that manner we managed. Life was not easy at that time. Winters were very hard. But having been acclimated since our birth to a cold climate we were healthy,and, in our way, happy because we were children and we enjoyed our river, which was a playground for us. Skating in the winter, sledding down the hill. Ah, swimming in the summer, boating and fishing.

DANE: Now, the war comes along in 1914. Did that disrupt any communication that your mother was having with your father? Did--

OOGJEN: I believe that's what happened, because about that time, as I heard it from my mother later, all communications between my mother and father had stopped. And this went on for a period of nine years. We didn't know where my father was, know where he lived, or whether he was still alive.

DANE: And then how did you start to make contact and think about picking up everything and coming to America?

OOGJEN: One day my mother's brother, uncle of ours that came to visit, he came often to see if we were all right. This time, however, uncle asked to speak to my mother privately.

DANE: Your uncle, is it your father's brother or your mother's brother?

OOGJEN: Mother's brother. My mother sends us out in the yard. Uncle seemed to spend quite a long time talking to my mother and after he left my mother called us in and told us the news which uncle had brought. The news was that my father had contacted my uncle that he was alive and lived in America.

DANE: Was that a happy day?

OOGJEN: And that we were to come and join him. That father would arrange for our transportation through an agency which would direct us on our journey. Cut, please. (Break in tape.)

DANE: So your uncle had come to tell you--

OOGJEN: This is a reminder of our sequence. I'll just look at it. I won't read. Let's see now-- We were not near the area where World War was raging. Therefore we were not aware of the distress which was going, was being caused by, by the upheaval of the other cities, and our lives continued quite, oh, orderly as usual. (She rustles papers.) Now, it was my mother who had to decide whether to go or not, which was an immense decision to make because it involved so much which was meaningful to her. Her roots in the city where she was born, her relatives, and upsetting our, her housekeeping. And, uh, taking the children away from their school and friends. But mainly her concern was, and apprehension, going to a foreign land, not knowing the language, not understanding whom, or where she would live. The question was very perplexing, and mom was very thoughtful in those days. The definitive fact for her to go was persuasion by her relatives that the family must be reunited, she with her husband, and the children with their father. She had reached a decision. We were to go. We would go.

DANE: Do you remember when she told you?

OOGJEN: It was maybe about two, three weeks after uncle's visit. Took some consideration on her part. Of course, my brothers, especially, were tremendously excited because they knew geography, they had heard of America. But I was nonplussed, not impressed at all. I was attached to my school, my friends, teachers, my surroundings. And I had not fully committed myself to give all that up. But go we must, so preparations were made for the journey. Clothing was sorted out which would be taken along, packed in the suitcases. Treasured photographs of mom and dad when they were twenty-five, carefully

packed. Some silver, which mom treasured and wanted to take with. And then lastly the food. No fast food shops available on the way. My brothers killed the chickens we had there. We had an uncle who had land and kept chickens, had given us. Mom was busy cleaning, frying. She baked bread. We had not made sausage at home. But there were various other foods such as apples, because we lived in an apple area. Every house had an apple orchard in back. And that's where I would go when I wanted to observe. The trees fascinated me, especially in autumn. I would walk along the paths, so colorful, the colorful leaves drenched by a recent rain, and smell the soil. And I would watch for an apple here and there that was left on the tree. And then, gradually, our luggage was assembled. My mother called my uncle and assigned various articles of furniture that should ne divided between her two brothers that lived in the town. Not too long after, the relatives gathered to see us off. We were taken to the train station. I believe it was a horse carriage. And the train was waiting, our relatives hugged and kissed and waved, and the train started to move.

DANE: What was in your heart at that moment?

OOGJEN: It is difficult to describe my personal feelings. I felt lost, as if there was nothing to hold on ahead of us, but having my mother and my two brothers with me, we felt we were still a family, though our lives would never be the same. Our destination was Moscow, where we were to wait for an exit visa. Arriving in Moscow, we found private living quarters where we would stay until the visa was granted through an American embassy, which my younger brother and mother visited weekly. Mom would tell me that she saw many flags in this American embassy, and there was one which she particularly picked out to be the prettiest. My older brother and I would explore the big city. We would walk the cobbled squares, visit the cathedrals, the parks. And near the house where we lived was a football field, and we watched the young men playing soccer. Weeks went by, months and months in all, and still we waited. And then one day a visa for our exit was granted, to proceed further.

DANE: When you were in Moscow, before we go from there, was it a much bigger city than, than your town that you had come from? Was it a whole new adventure?

OOGJEN: Oh, much larger, much larger. Moscow was, Moscow contained museums and theaters and, uh, and the cathedrals and churches. It was immense. It was, um, an experience of a lifetime to visit it.

DANE: And where did you know, did you stay, not in the hotel, was it? How could you afford it?

OOGJEN: No, we stayed with a private family, which we engaged quite accidentally. Arriving, I'm going back some, arriving at the station in Moscow, we didn't know a soul. I don't know why there was no agent there, whereas there were agents at the other places where we stopped. My mother and, uh, my brothers, brought our luggage outside on the sidewalk, it was summer, and we looked around. The streets were mostly empty. And along came a droshky, one horse carriage, which people would hire to transport their luggage or take them places. A young man was driving it, and mother hailed him. And she asked him, she said, "Would you know of a place where my children and I could stay while we are, we're on our way to America. We don't know anyone. And we do need a shelter." The young man said, "If you will wait here I will ask my mother and father. I'll be back." He did return, and said we would have room at his house.

DANE: Isn't that amazing? I wonder how-- (Addresses engineer,) How are we doing? I see you, it's amazing that he would just take you right in. I mean, you didn't know anyone in the city.

OOGJEN: None at all. None at all. Not a friend. Although it was

our language and all that, we had no friends in Moscow.

DANE: And was that stay, you stayed there for a couple of months.

OOGJEN: Eight months.

DANE: Eight months.

OOGJEN: We were out of school. All this time we were out of school.

DANE: How did you fill the time? Would you just go through the city. walk the streets, go to museums, or did you get work, or--

OOGJEN: Oh, my mother bought a portable sewing machine, the old fashioned, the wheel type, and she took in sewing to make a little money to keep her busy, and we children, we, we were just roaming. We made some friends who lived next door. But mostly we were, we could not enroll in school, expecting to leave, and it was a difficult time for us, not belonging anywhere for eight months, space of eight months.

DANE: Did you ever despair and think this is ridiculous, let's go home?

OOGJEN: Well that's, that's where my mother was just about to decide to go back. She wrote to her brother and his answer was, "Not a step back. Continue." And so mom stayed and we waited until we were granted the visa.

DANE: Then you had another, then you went up to, um, where did you go next? Didn't you go, you went to Moscow--

OOGJEN: Minsk.

DANE: And you went to Minsk.

OOGJEN: Minsk. Minsk, at the time, was Byelorussia, although I'm not too much on geography having had only five years of schooling. I was not aware of the school for European geography. But it was the Byelorussia, and-- Although we had tickets to, direct to Riga, trains were slow. Our money was running out and when we arrived in Minsk, riding a freight train because our train would not arrive until a week or three days later, we were robbed during the night and out luggage was stolen from under my head. I had slept from exhaustion.

DANE: Did they take everything?

OOGJEN: Except one suitcase. My head was lifted. I don't know who did it. But when mom and my brothers returned fromthe station checking about our train which we should have taken, which was not available, passenger train, our luggage was gone. And there were the photographs, the silver, and nice clothes to wear on our arrival. At this time mom made another decision. She had a sister nearby, in Stalingrad. Previously it was (?), Stalingrad. At present I believe it's called Volgagrad. We reached Stalingrad, where my mother, my aunt had a two room humble house, having three sons of her own plus the three of us, there were six children and two women in the two little rooms. My aunt was a widow, and she supported her family by baking pierogi, which was, which were yeast dough and had various fillings, fruit, cheese, meat. She had a license to sell this at the bazaar.

DANE: Was it good?

OOGJEN: Oh, she would, she would make a variety of those, maybe a dozen, and her oldest son would help her on a pushcart bring them to the bazaar. And she would sell

them so much a cut, and would return home, her cart completely empty. So the two, my mother and she, worked very hard baking. My younger cousin and I would have a chore to do. We would be given a box of raisins, and to pick out the little stones which might be found there, or the little stems, before they were processed to cook, for cooking. And apricots by the box which my aunt would buy. And there would be meat to chop. We stayed in Stalingrad several months, I believe. Our time was very difficult.

DANE: Hold on just a second. I need to turn the tape over. We're on the end of the tape. This is the end of side one with Maria Oogjen, Interview Number 104. It's 10:30.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

DANE: This is the beginning of side two, Maria Oogjen, Interview Number 104. It's 10:35. Okay, now we're rolling. Um, in Stalingrad, you had a chance to communicate with your father again.

OOGJEN: Uh, yes. We wrote that we were temporarily living with my aunt. Uh, although we did not go to school, uh, my brothers had found, um, employment. One with the American embassy as a messenger boy and the older one in a children's hospital in the same capacity. My younger cousin and I, we just played around the house and my middle cousin loved to carve out boats. Living on the Volga, he was a dedicated, how shall I say, lover of ships and boats and, uh, life on the water. And, uh, we made friends with our neighbors with whom we corresponded after arrival in America. Um, we did keep in touch with our father. We told him we needed money and we were, he

arranged to send money and a box containing sweaters, all the same, brown sweaters which we were wearing when our passport was issued, and which appears thereon. The box contained sacks of flour, rice, which we readily recognized. They were cans. We did not know the contents of them. Uh, and when we opened one we saw there was a thick, white fluid, sort of yellowish, like heavy homemade cream. And it was puzzling what kind of milk or cream was it. And then one day, before going to work, my mother made pancakes. It was a treat after a long absence of anything so special. My brothers had their fill, and were off to work. Soon enough we saw them return, and my mother was puzzled. What, what did they forget? Coming into the house they announced they still wanted more pancakes. Mom was only too happy to feed her boys. She, she loved to wait on people, feed the family.

DANE: And those were pancakes made with that flour that your father has sent with the sweaters and-- Uh-huh.

OOGJEN: Yes. And, of course, rice was appreciated, being, being not too widely used in Russia. Potatoes were the mainstay of our family and the surrounding area. So shortly after that, uh, how shall I say, lift of our morale, spirits, that things were on the up and improving, that father knew our whereabouts and the conditions where we lived, but that we still were waiting for the visa, we felt happier and more anxious to proceed with our journey. And before long, a visa was granted which enabled us to go to Riga, Tatvia.

DANE: And that was to be the port you would leave from? Is that right?

OOGJEN: In Riga agents met us. Of course, all these travels were by train. Agents met us and conducted us to a, a house where other immigrants were, were also waiting, waiting for a ship which would take us across the Baltic to Danzig, the seaport Gdansk, as of now. We stayed in Riga for approximately three, four weeks, having our meals in a communal dining room, not knowing each other, but seeing the faces, daily becoming familiar with a few, but never any close contact with them, any of them. The ship arrived and we, we were put aboard. The crossing would only be about three, four days. However, the weather was foul and the sea was rough. Many of the passengers were very ill. Our family, however, did not suffer any, um, of that consequences.

DANE: You didn't get sick? Your mother, brothers? Nobody? That's extraordinary, extraordinary.

OOGJEN: We were comforting other people who weren't comfortable, especially children who were frightened.

DANE: And were these all people that had been in the boarding house in Riga? They were all people that were going to be going to America.

OOGJEN: Yes, yes. They were processed aboard the ship, and we among them, our family among them. We reached Danzig after several days of the stormy crossing, and in Danzig again the agents conducted us to a, a waiting place again, arranged by the agents to wait for the ship which would take us across the Atlantic to New York. We stayed in Danzig approximately three or four weeks, I believe. Father had sent sufficient monies, so we shopped, my mother and the family shopped for clothing. A sailor suit for me, new, fashionable coats for my brothers and mom. We walked the streets in Danzig, found it very clean, and we even attended a theater.

DANE: A movie theater?

OOGJEN: At the entrance to the theater I was detained. The censors tried to explain that I was too young to see a movie, the type of a movie that was being shown. And I was asked to wait, to sit in a little room, until the censors would leave. I sat and waited and I waited and waited. I never got into the theater. (She laughs.)

DANE: Did everyone else go in? Did everyone else go in and see the show and leave you behind? Did they say why you couldn't go in?

OOGJEN: Because I was too young to see a movie of the kind that was being shown. There was strict censorship.

DANE: God. Amazing. Now, why were you detained so long in Danzig, waiting for the boat, or--

OOGJEN: Waiting for the ocean liner, Red Star Line, Samland, for which we had the tickets my father had bought for us.

DANE: Uh-huh. And he had already sent those tickets. You had them in your hand? Do you remember if your mother had them?

OOGJEN: Well, I believe the agents had them and, uh, upon, uh, being admitted to a, to board the ship, they handed them to them, to the officer in charge of embarkation.

DANE: Do you remember where, at this point they usually had the physical examinations done in Europe. Did you have your, were you examined physically at any point yet in any of the cities when you were getting your visa, or in Danzig waiting to get on the ship? Did they ever do a physical exam of you?

OOGJEN: Not at all. We were not stopped for any physical disorders, had their been any, exams. We were only stopped for insufficient papers and insufficient money to proceed further.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And in Danzig did you ever start getting excited about coming, or was this whole, you'd been away from your village now for a long time.

OOGJEN: After such a long trek across most of Europe, eastward, we were losing hope, becoming discouraged. It seemed so long and tiresome. It seemed like there would never be an end. And travel at the time was not the best, to say the least. We had to endure uncomfortable accommodations, new places to stay in, and felt lost and our roots uprooted, and not belonging anywhere at this time. So, when the Samland arrived, and within several days I believe it stopped to be loaded with product, products and freight or whatever, we were finally aboard the Samland and bound for New York.

DANE: And is that the, is Samland? S-A-M-L-A-N-D?

OOGJEN: S-A-M, like in Sam, L-A-N-D. Samland.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Was it big, impressive boat to you, or--

OOGJEN: Uh, looking up at the boat it seemed immense, that nothing could move it. It seemed tremendous, larger than anything we have ever seen. It was, we would lift out heads up high. almost two stories high, now that I know what a two story building is. And so

we found ourselves passengers aboard the Samland, third class. I believe finances were the reason for low, steerage tickets, because there were three of us. Father wasn't able to do any better at the time.

DANE: Do you remember what it looked like down in steerage?

OOGJEN: Well, it had a very spacious deck, long. And there were various smoke, there were two or three smokestacks. And there were sailors walking all over, and there were railing particularly we noticed, lean over and look at the sea. And there were places where first people could sit, and we see chairs. But down below, where we had our accommodations, we had our cabin which was, had four, two bunk beds, two for my brothers, and two for my mother and myself. Meals were served in, um, an area which was dining room, but with individual long, type tables, which were screwed to the floors. While the weather was fair, most of us, of our family, would be out on deck. We watched the dolphins leap out of the water, usually in pairs, following the ship. We heard and saw seagulls screaming, waiting for the leftovers which we would cast over the rail into the ocean. The sailors arranged a swing for the children on deck.

DANE: Oh, was that fun?

OOGJEN: Yes, though it was cold, but we children didn't seem to notice it. Remember, it was December.

DANE: And didn't you, wasn't it on the boat that you had Christmas?

OOGJEN: Oh, yes. It was Christmas, December 25th, down below, in the dining room. The sailors put up a little Christmas tree which had lights, I'm sure, and looked

very pretty and gave a feeling of comfort and happiness whereas the interior was bare and not too attractive. For dinner, I do not remember what it consisted of, but I do remember after dinner all of us received a fresh apple for desert, which was quite a treat.

DANE: Uh-huh. And did you sing songs that Christmas? Was there a time for any song singing on the ship?

OOGJEN: No, we did not sing any songs because there were minorities which were, spoke their own language. And the unity in the song was virtually impossible. There was a young man whose family was going to New York. He must have been in, about nineteen or twenty. He had his, uh, guitar along, and we heard him play and sing in our native language. Shyly we would approach him and first listen and then we'd join in to sing. Those, that was the happy period of the first, say, nine days or so on board. And then we ran into a storm. The sea began to swell. The waves became higher and higher. The boat began to roll side to side. Before long the water was flooding the deck, and all passengers were ordered below. We were downstairs for approximately three days. Little groups of people could be seen praying, each in their own language, each in their own way. A little boy whose mother was very ill would stoop down an his knees and say, in Russian, "Don't touch me." He thought, while the ship would roll to one side, he thought that somebody was pushing him over. My mother took a blanket and she said when the ship would roll over we would all go down together. It a was very fearful time, the few days that the storm lasted. Especially at night, when we heard the, the screwed-on tables on their hinges noisily producing such an eerie sound, because the stillness, there was such a hush inside the boat. People spoke in whispers.

DANE: Were you frightened? Would you curl up with your mother?

OOGJEN: We were all frightened, but resigned to what was to be, to be, was, would be. There were rumors that he captain had to change

the course of the, of the ship, because of the storm. Hans, it was. Thereby we aboard twenty-two days. After the sea had calmed somewhat, the hold was opened, and passengers were allowed, once again, to be on deck. And sailing proceeded as it had begun, smoothly and, uh, to a certain extent, enjoyable. As if we were looking towards something, and something wonderful was about to happen.

DANE: Was it a relief to come up out of the, the hold, and into the sunshine and the daylight, into the fresh air?

OOGJEN: Uh, there were portholes, but we never opened them. I think the sailors, the sailors looked after ventilation and conditions and such, but there was, it was dark, it was dark. Perhaps lights, lights, lamps, lights were--

DANE: And after the storm, though, was it a relief to be able to come outside and be in the out of doors?

OOGJEN: Oh, yes indeed. There was a happiness, um, seen on every face that the worst of the crossing was over, and that we were nearing our goal. And then one day there was unusual excitement on deck, and people began to crowd towards the railing. We, too, went to the railing, tried to see something, but we could not see anything where others claimed they saw something that looked like land. Hour by hour, what seemed to be land was more evident, and people began to shout and wave and some wept, embraced and shouted. We were nearing the shores of New York City.

DANE: Could you believe that you were almost there? Could you believe that you were almost there?

OOGJEN: It was hard to believe that we had reached the end of this

perilous and dangerous travel and crossing. Still, we faced something, because we were to, to undergo a new experience, which was Ellis Island. And at that time it completely had no meaning to us whatsoever. What was to be done to us or with us of for us we did not know. Agents directed us. We disembarked, each one wearing a card, our only I.D. It probably showed our names and destination. The agents conducted us to proceed into the interior of this big, grey building. From shore to the building we crossed on a small wood plank bridge by twos and threes. Agents headed us over to the officials at Ellis Island, and we were inside. At the entrance, men and boys were directed to one side, women and girls to the opposite side. When we entered the women's compartment, or I should say place, the first thing that I remembered seeing was many iron bunk beds, row and rows of bunk beds, with no other furniture in sight. The next thing that followed was our luggage was taken away to be fumigated, fumigated in ovens under intense heat. The passengers were processed in turn. To begin with, there were showers for all. Our hair was washed and combed and examined for pediculous (?), lice.

DANE: Uh-huh. And did they--

OOGJEN: Eventually, physical examinations began. We were seen by various doctors. Examined, our ears were examined for any ailments or hearing loss. We saw an eye doctor, eye examination. A physician examined us. Our heart problems if any existed, and our lungs. Our skin was examined for any sores or just disorder of any type. Our feet were examined. Examinations were very rigid. But, happily, our family passed again.

DANE: Were you ever worried? (she addresses engineer.) Are we near the end? Oh. We're going to have to, to end and start another tape. How are you doing? This

is the end of side two, Maria Oogjen, Interview Number 104. It's 11:05.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

DANE: This is tape two, side one, of Maria Oogjen, Interview Number 104. It is 11:06. We were just talking about, I know this may be a little out of sequence for you, but we were talking about when you came in, and that there was smell in the air. What did it smell like to you?

OOGJEN: Disinfectant, medicinal.

DANE: Was it really strong?

OOGJEN: Strong and very obvious to our, when inhaled.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. There was, I'm sure you're going to get to it, but I just wanted to make sure you didn't forget. They said, you said that they took your suitcases away.

OOGJEN: Oh, yes.

DANE: Yeah, tell me t hat story.

OOGJEN: Uh, our suitcases were returned to us eventually, and mom opened one of them to find one thing or the other. And when she opened it she found a bar of soap which had, she had brought along. Being a very practical type of person, she thought a bar of soap would come in handy. And lo, a disaster. The intense heat had melted the soap and

it went over everything, including my blue paper diary which I had kept when we were in Stalingrad. I, I was very grieved by the loss of my jotting down in childish hand. But keeping the diary seemed to be, uh, something I had inherited from my brothers. But soon that small incident was forgotten, and we, having passed all our exams, had our, uh, our permission to proceed further to out last destination which was Chicago. I must remark here that all during our stay at Ellis Island, which was approximately two weeks, because of the number of passengers being processed there and interned, we found officials and, I suppose, they were nurses and doctors, very friendly, kind and gentle. Perhaps they felt that we were. we were afraid and we were, everything was new, and the language that they spoke was completely foreign to us. They directed us slowly and carefully and we managed to be at the right place at the right time.

DANE: Did your mother, since you were there for almost two weeks, did your mother ever worry about the possibility of being sent back to Russia, of having--

OOGJEN: If she had had any feelings of, uh, being apprehensive about returning, she kept them to herself. Mother was not a very loud, or a person of much speech. She was a quiet type of person, very cooperative, intelligent, with great understanding of things even she could not comprehend, even when she could not understand the language.

DANE: What was your impression as a fifteen year old on Ellis Island? You were there for two weeks. Did they allow you to walk around on the grounds, or did you make friends?

OOGJEN: Well, we didn't walk around too much because of the number of people. We were afraid we'd be lost and, uh, meals were served in a communal dining room, and that where we see some of the faces become familiar.There were benches and long tables. I don't remember

where the meals were. I learned of, of bread pudding and, uh, cocoa, with which we were familiar, but it was a rarity in our home because of the expense, and such goodies as we later learned to enjoy.

DANE: Some, um, other first impressions that other people have shared with us is that they saw their first banana on Ellis Island or they saw their first black person. Did you have any first impressions like that?

OOGJEN: Uh, my personal feelings was, or my imagination of this type, that when we would arrive in America, even if it was New York City, but precisely, the place where we would live, it would be on a second story. And all I would have to do was look in the window and I would see people wearing their different national costumes.

DANE: No kidding. Hmm.

OOGJEN: I was amazed to see that everyone was similarly dressed, without very little difference. And perhaps I was disappointed. (They laugh.) Bananas were something ne. One day we heard a man calling, calling. We looked out the window. He was pushing a cart. And my father had given my brother a coin to get whatever he was selling. My brother brought some bananas upstairs, up. We didn't know what they were. We had not seen any before. And after we took one bite we decided we didn't like them. They tasted like raw potatoes. We didn't like gum. When my father said it was made of rubber I refused to chew rubber. Later, the children in school which I enrolled, teased me that if I should swallow gum I would die.

DANE: Did you believe them?

OOGJEN: Probably.

DANE: Before I get you to leave Ellis Island, when you came into New York harbor, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

OOGJEN: Of course. Of course. We did not know, on, on approaching the shore, we saw an immense figure, which seemed to be a woman with her right hand uplifted high, and holding something that looked like a torch, but very intricately made. It was so tall that we just couldn't imagine a statue of the proportions, impossible, to be made. We didn't know what it meant or represented at the time, until later, until we learned that it was a much treasured possession in America. The Statue of Liberty. Yes, isn't that it, liberty.

DANE: Oh, I know, this would be a good time, I'd love you to read that card that your brother wrote. I think it's in that pile, yes.

OOGJEN: My two brothers were very alert teenagers. They were into everything, keeping records, diaries, address books, correspondence, making notes of everything. We happened to have a postal card which, which read, "Baltic America Line." And a ship. My younger brother wrote beneath the ship in our native language, "The end to all our suffering, and we safely arrived in America. Date, January 6, 1923, Chicago, Illinois." Initial P.E.

DANE: Was that how you felt, also? That after two years you were, two years.

OOGJEN: Almost two years enroute, the waiting period. Leaving out city in '21, arriving early '23.

DANE: So from Ellis Island, how did, you were there for two weeks. Now, do you know you were detained for so long? Was it money, waiting for money from your father, or--

OOGJEN: Ellis Island?

DANE: Yeah.

OOGJEN: Oh, no. It was for medical approval, medical checkups. No papers were involved, or detained us at Ellis Island. It was merely the processing of, uh, a great number of people. And we had to wait our turn to be called. Yes.

DANE: So at what point were you allowed to go? Did you just wait for that long a time? Did you know your father was--

OOGJEN: No. After, after, uh, we passed the physical examinations, we were allowed to proceed, and agents conducted us to a train in New York City which was bound for Chicago, where my father was to meet us from the train. (She coughs.)

DANE: So when it was time to leave Ellis Island, they took you on a train into the city, into New York City, and then you took a train to Chicago. Was that train ride an adventure?

OOGJEN: Oh, yes it was, because we passed, we saw for the first time, leaving New York, we did see what they call, at the time, the skyscrapers.

DANE: Was that impressive?

OOGJEN: Very much so. Especially to my younger brother, who was interested

in architecture and later became an engineer, a structural engineer. We were impressed by the crowds in New York milling about, and couldn't imagine where did all those people come from? Yes, we felt a little lost. But after we were settled on the train, and the trip lasted about, oh, a matter of hours, I believe. And we, we stopped at a station which might have been Union Station, but we were not aware of it. At the station, there was such a tremendous crush in the crowd of people meeting relatives that we felt completely engulfed. We children didn't know who to look for, or who would look for us. But mon did. And soon enough, an average sized man in a derby type hat came towards us and mon said, "This is your father." I do not, did not remember him, nor recollect him, as him, as he was now. And because I remembered him only from the photographs when he and mom were approximately twenty-five years old each and here, here was dad, quite unfamiliar, my father, we followed him to his automobile, out of the station, and through the crowds, and to our first ride in an automobile.

DANE: Were you surprised that he even had a car?

OOGJEN: Naturally. We thought it was impossible for anybody to own an automobile. Perhaps it was our first auto that we saw. We didn't see any in our city, we didn't see in any of the other cities. If we did, they must have been so very few, they were unnoticeable. Well, we drove through the city, I don't remember which way, and we saw buildings and parks and eventually my father took us to a northwest house where we would live. As my mother was, felt strange, because everything in this new establishment was new to her. The furniture, the coal-burning stove, whereas in her own home, in our, in our own country, we had wood-burning stoves. This was our first coal-burning stove, which mama had learned how to operate.

DANE: Wasn't it dirty, coal?

OOGJEN: It was hard coal, anthracite, which was cleaner coal than the soft

coal. And it wasn't too long, mom was adaptable, she learned. I'm sure she missed everything she had left behind. But having reached the goal, which would reunite the children with the father, she felt very happy about it.

DANE: How about you? Were you glad to be there once you got to your, your father had a place for you in Chicago?

OOGJEN: Well, I can say that my feelings were divided, still. I thought that I would like certain things, but I did miss what we had left behind us. It was too, too much. It was so new, that it would take time to absorb it all. Being children, we were assimilated into the American culture very quickly, and my mother marveled at the fact that we enjoyed our, our, especially myself, school lunches, they called them five-cents plate lunch which included, oh, a helping of spaghetti, a glass, a small glass bottle of milk, a pudding or a fresh fruit, and it only cost five cents.

DANE: That was something new, to get all that hot food.

OOGJEN: Yes. It was, it was very interesting and enjoyable. I learned to like bread puddings and jello and milk. We had not had much milk because we did not own a cow, we were not farmers. We bought milk at the market and our usual beverage was tea because there was no indoor plumbing, there was no running water. All our water came from the river. And therefore the Sumavar (name of river) kept going day and night. Drinking boiled water saved us from becoming ill. It could be typhoid, it could be a serious illness, because people bathed in the water, summers they swam. They washed their clothes, rinsed their clothes, most likely. And, naturally, the water was not pure.

DANE: Here in America did you go right to school in Chicago, or did you have to go to work?

OOGJEN: Well, before long, after our arrival, my father was concerned about our education and he, first he enrolled me in elementary school, which was about eight blocks away. And I was conducted to a, on the first floor, first garde, where there were six-year-olds sitting in their little desks. I felt as if I didn't belong there, feeling much older, but not much taller, because I'm very short. And I remember meeting a teacher, with a very kindly look. She turned around to the children, and she said, "This is Mary. She had just come to live in America." Without being asked how or when, I went to the board and I drew a ship, roughly, indicating that I, I had come by boat. I was given a desk towards the back of the room, and I was given small little pictures, which showed houses and tables and animals, and a little box of words. And I was to try to arrange the words to fit a picture they represented. Having has school before, but not able to speak the language, I understood quite a bit. And I was not detained very long in first grade. I was processed very quickly. First, to second, to third. Surprisingly, spelling didn't phase me. I must have had good memory. Still do. And always received a hundred on my papers.

DANE: And all this time were you learning English? Was it easy for you to take on English?

OOGJEN: Um, not too easy when it came to parts of speech, taking a sentence apart. But I found the teachers very dedicated, patient, urging me to at least try. And I did try. And most of the times I succeeded, and it was very gratifying to know that I, um, was acquiring knowledge in speaking, in writing and reading. I liked to draw, and the teachers would give me paper and crayons to draw from the books. And what did surprise me most of all was the availability of school material. There were books, for each child, and paper, and crayons, and pencils, whereas there were such scarcity of that at the time I was in school, when we had to divide a pencil in two so that

each one of us would have a half. And the light and the warmth and the coziness of the schoolrooms, the cleanliness, all that I found very, very enjoyable. And I began to like school from that day on. In the course of four years I finished eight grades. Of course, by this time, I was close to eighteen. But I, I did want to go on with my education.

DANE: To college?

OOGJEN: High school. I enrolled in a two year commercial course and the courses consisted of typewriting, shorthand, which was not required, but I took it was a, my fifth major. English, adding machine, filing, and then shorthand. I enjoyed school very much. I enjoyed singing, I joined glee clubs, I enjoyed gym. I was very adept at gymnastics. I received little tokens of recognition.

DANE: All this, in all this time, when you were going through school, when you first came to school, were you treated differently by the other children for being from another country, as a newcomer? Did they--

OOGJEN: Well, I, I wouldn't know which country they came from. I assumed they were all native Americans.

DANE: But did they treat you any differently, as someone from another country?

OOGJEN: I don't believe so. I made friends easily. And soon enough learned to join the others, skipping rope and playing classes on the sidewalk, chalked on the sidewalk. My problem was to learn how to roller skate. I knew how to ice skate and swim, but I had difficulty

keeping my balance. Instead of leaning forward to keep my balance, I would let the skates go right under me.

DANE: Oh, no, and you'd fall down. Let me see how we're doing. (Engineer speaks.) Yeah, we're going to turn over. This is the end of side one, tape two, Maria Oogjen, Interview Number 104. It is 11:34.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

DANE: Side two, tape two, of Maria Oogjen, Interview Number 104. It's 11:410.

OOGJEN: The American version later became Sisoff. I have my marriage license that shows my maiden name.

DANE: We missed it. We weren't rolling the tape yet. Could you say what your maiden name was in Russian?

OOGJEN: Maria Sisoyava. But in our language, when a certain young man or certain young lady acquires the age of, sat seventeen, she is addressed as, uh, she adopts her father's first name and is called Maria Vladimirna and then Sisoyava. Vladamirna was my father's name, Vladamir. And so it was with my brothers. Peter, Piotr Vladamirna Sisoyava. So my name was Maria V., for Vladamirna Sosoyava. But I do have a second name, which was given to me, or a middle name, or initial, at baptism I am Mary Magdeline.

DANE: Oh, that's nice. Did you choose that, or was that given to you?

OOGJEN: That was given to me at my baptism. Because I was born at the holiday which was approaching and the birth, this is of course, religious, of religious significance, Maria Magdelina, Mary Magdeline, on the calendar. And the children, at that time, were named after the saints the closest to the birth date. And then we celebrate mostly not so much birthday as the names day. (Russian phrase.) The names day.

DANE: What would they call you, what would be your last name at school, then? Sisoyava?

OOGJEN: Well, when we went to the upper grades, fifth garde I was called Maria Sisoyava. Yeah, our last names were mentioned, yes. Yes.

DANE: Okay. So then, now we're going back to the, when you were in school and you were getting ready to graduate. did you have to go out to work at any point to bring in money? What was, how did you end up going out into the work force?

OOGJEN: Uh, well, after graduating my two years of high school the teachers had urged me to stay on for four. But I felt too old, and also I felt the necessity of contributing a little money, financially, cash wise, to the family, and I went to an agency and registered for an office job. Not too long afterward they called me, or sent me a card, to come to the, to their office. They had a job

for me. And they sent me to big company, which was a national adjusting association, a collection agency. It was a large office with many girls sitting behind typewriters. Rows and rows. And a very strict forelady walking up and down the aisles to see that they were busy. And not gossiping and wasting time. We had to punch an enormous wheel, time clock. Ten minutes for morning break, tn minutes for your afternoon break. And I worked there for approximately three years and I was promoted--

DANE: What did you do? What was your first job there?

OOGJEN: I was typing envelopes, because this company was involved with collecting in deadbeats. And our letters went to as far as the Filipinos. Students were enrolled in correspondence schools and failed to pay, all over the United States. And I just kept typing envelopes and typing envelopes. Not too long after that, envelopes, I was given to do dictaphone, which was a roll, and attorney would do, would dictate his letter, and it would be recorded on a roll type cylinder. If you would insert it in a certain machine and put the earphones on and turn it on, you would hear the attorney. Attorney Gordon J. Durand, you would hear him write personal letters, because they ignored our forms. So stricter measures were taken to force them to come across and pay. So that was the work I was in.

DANE: So you would type the letter from what--

OOGJEN: I would type the letter from the dictaphone, yeah.

DANE: That was a pretty ne invention, wasn't it, the dictaphone?

OOGJEN: Well, I don't know. It was there when I arrived. I wouldn't know

the history of it, yeah. Of course, we, I learned some adding machines, which I used later, working in a hospital. Broke my, broke my, uh, left wrist ice skating when I was fifty-eight, and I kept working in a medical department. Right hand was all right. I couldn't type. Typed electric machine, all that. But I could use adding machines. So I was doing statistics, how many cancers, how many births, how many different various and things scheduled.

DANE: And in those first jobs how much did you get paid? Do you remember?

OOGJEN: Fifteen dollars. And then a couple of months later I was given an envelope by the forelady and, uh, we were paid cash at the time, and she said, she said, I became Marie since my high school, she says, "Marie, there's a couple dollars extra for you, but don't tell the girls." I had a raise because I was ambitious. And I gave them their dues, I, I was honest and I worked, and it continued throughout all my employment in a doctor's office, almost nine years, in which when I worked for state in medicine, and then on Michigan Avenue. And then the hospital. And all this time, I was separated from my husband. Never divorced, separated, and I raised my two girls almost alone. My, my, uh, folks helped me. But, uh, I managed. Never let things get me down. I always would surface. And in spite of my small statue I, I had confidence in myself that I would be worth their fifteen dollars, or seventeen dollars. In fact, when I, I quit my job with the doctors for personal reasons. Another disagreeable person came on the job and I said, "I can't work when there's no cooperation." They said, "You want more money?" I said, "It isn't the money." It's just, the person I worked with for nine years she retired when she became sixty-two. So, um, I was sorry to leave, but, uh, when there's no cooperation I felt it would be just futile to try to work to do my best.

DANE: You sound like a really--

OOGJEN: No, in any job there had to be cooperation. Then I worked in St. Elizabeth's Hospital, Chicago, medical department. I had no, there was no problem finding jobs.

DANE: I'm going to ask you this question because I don't want not to get it on tape, did you at, at any point decide to become an American citizen?

OOGJEN: Uh, yes. When I was married in 1930 and I mentioned American citizenship papers, my husband said, "You do not need them because I am a citizen." So when we separated I thought, "Here I go, after my papers." There was a two year waiting period, and I attended school for, to learn of our United States government. Three branches of the United States government, Executive, Judicial, Administrative, and all that. And May 23, 1944, '41, I received my citizenship papers. I was very happy. Later on my mother decided to get, when she was in her late fifties. I enrolled her in a night school where classes for prospective citizens were held, and I almost translated the whole constitution to her. And she knew the three branches of the American government. She learned to sign her name and write her address. Although she did not speak very much English, our home was, in our home we spoke our own language. We children, outside the home, spoke only English. Mother said, "Go to school as long as we are able to afford it." But there was no holding back or pushing. We went, we went on our own because we just, we just loved books. And English has been a challenge to me since I came, during all these years, and still is. I've had, I've had difficulty in the English, um, grammar, understanding English grammar. One was, why were there two "had hads in some sentences. It was not until I went to college English, community college, and took up English, and composition, etc., that I had understood why there were two "had hads." The other problem was who and whom, and when to use it. Of course, English literature is very, is not very easy. When you say fact, you hear a "k", but you write a "c". And factory. Well, a great deal of it has to be relied on your memory. I had problem with syllabication. I could spell in a string, but I couldn't syllabize. Now I have learned, because my dictionary, a

book and a dictionary, and paper and pencil, were my companions wherever I went. I looked up everything. That was one way to learn and read.

DANE: I want to ask this also, because I think we're running, running out.

OOGJEN: All right. It's fine with me.

DANE: Looking back at, you became a citizen. You read Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning. You've got John Cheever right up there in the library.

OOGJEN: That's my books. My flowers, everything.

DANE: Everything. And yet there's pictures of you in Russian costumes with a balalaika. Tell me a little bit about what you think about your Russian-ness, and being Russian born, and then becoming an American. What your--

OOGJEN: I feel as if I am two persons at times. I feel divided. I, uh, I enjoy literature in both languages, and the cultural aspects such as their songs and their, of course, their woodlands, the familiar scenes of my childhood. They always have a favorable, leave a favorable impression. I mean, they have left a favorable impression which will always stay with me. And, uh, I feel I do not belong, neither one. But, at age seventy-six, I have, in thirty years, I have found contentment in both and deriving satisfaction from being able to read and speak and write in both languages. Of course, having spent more years in, in America, I, at this time, I know more of America than I do of my own country, because of a transition there after several, several wars. And although geographically I'm very poor. But our little city is still on the map, regardless of the fact that we cross the ocean and we saw the Statue of Liberty, and we learned what Ellis

Island means and why, which was vague experience at the time. But we complied with everything, and I believe my life in the States has been very satisfying and, uh, I find satisfaction in the small things that are available to me. Not aspiring for something that's way out of my reach or understanding. Simple pleasures. I like flowers. I do not enjoy TV too much. I'd rather resort to my books and quiet reading, which I do mostly in the evenings. And so coming to America has been a lifetime experience and a gratifying one. But we left behind, we, I felt sorrowful. For a while we kept rapid correspondence with our friends and relatives, and then censorship stepped in. And some of our letters, some of the sentences in our letters were blotted out, and some of, most of our friends had gone to other cities where they found employment after they grew up. Our relatives had passed away. My uncles, my aunts, my cousins, are scattered. Perhaps, being seventy-six, I wonder if any of them are still alive, considering the conditions there. And so eventually I lost contact with everyone, relatives and friends. I correspond with no one.

DANE: Did you ever wish, it doesn't sound like it, but did it ever, did you ever wish, in your adult life that you could have just stayed in Petrosk?

OOGJEN: Petrosk, oh, sometimes I believe we would have found and made our niche there as well as we did here, because most of our friends have. Our next door neighbors, two brothers, have, uh, established themselves. One became an artist. He sent sketches of out river and our old house. He became an art instructor. Others became electricians and, uh, some of my girlfriends married. On e of my cousins married a musician and went to live in Eurasia. That was the last information we had, that she had married, from my uncle's daughter, my mother's namesake, Natalie. And so I believe we would have, providing our health would not have suffered much. I believe we would have. We would have probably not known the difference. (Break in tape.)

DANE: You were just telling me a little about--

OOGJEN: And, uh, we rented a building on Chicago Avenue--

DANE: You have to start from the beginning, because we weren't--
You had a social club. How did that come about? You had--

OOGJEN: Um, we had learned that there were other families who had emigrated and were living in the vicinity, or nearby, um, um, suburbs. And, uh, we, uh, formed a club, a social club, where we could gather Sundays. And, um, rent, we rented a, somewhat, like a hall, and we would gather there Sundays. And we formed a dramatic group, and we presented, um, plays in our own language and some of us, um, were able to dance. I and my brother were among them. And my mother sewed costumes for a choral group. So we sort of had our unity. And, uh, perpetuation of our culture without any political, um, essence, just a social group, that we knew we were not complete strangers, in continuation of our own, uh, songs and dances and dramatics, even in which my mother participated. She like dramatics. So, but, uh, Russian people seemed to be the least organized of the minorities. I don't understand why, but perhaps the, some of the people who emigrated, their fathers had homes in Maywood, Lombard, Mailer's Park, because of the, uh, work problem. The fathers found employment in large factories such as the, The American Can Company. They worked, and they bought their homes there for their families. So they settled, sort of a little outside there. And then the first thing, when we arrived, we wanted to find a church, and orthodox church. And my brother scouted the neighborhood, my older brother. And we found an orthodox cathedral in Chicago, not too far away from us. (She coughs.) And, uh, religious service was very comforting, because we participated since early years in our own home church. We sang in the choir, we attended practice, we learned notes, and we enjoyed to sing various concerts, which would be the highlight presented, especially at

holidays, high days. And the concerts would be by Tchaikovsky, Boradin, and Korsakoff. So my brother and I were very close to the church in Chicago.

DANE: Were the people that were in the church also the people that were in the social club? Did that overlap at all?

OOGJEN: Yes. Most of them were. But, uh, over the years, people dropped out, for some reason or other. They either moved to other neighborhoods and, um, population, the church population dwindled, until the second generation came in and took over. It's flourishing now. The church is a landmark and, uh, funds which were provided for building it were supplied by the czar, and it was, um, I'm almost sure, it was designed by the famous architect Sullivan. And so, at this time, it's almost a hundred years old. Very beautiful interior, and very much like the church of old Russia, a very ornate, I had just given away a photograph of the inside of the church and the priests in their very elaborate head crowns and robes. And I had given it to my daughter. Yes.

DANE: Also did the name, the social club, did it have a name to it? What did you call it?

OOGJEN: Well, no name, really. No name, really. Just that we knew it was located on Chicago Avenue. It was a hall. And we had no leaders, no directors. We all participated. And my brother and I were natural dancers so we pitched in and did our bit, a number on the stage. We just knew. We would, um, have announcements. "Next Sunday there will be a drama presented," "Next Sunday there will be a ball." That's right. Holidays were celebrated with a ball. There would be masquerades, and there would be dancing.

DANE: Did you make costumes?

OOGJEN: Well, the costumes, were part that, part of which would be reserved for the stage, but for social dancing and, uh-- But the masquerades, people came dressed in costumes, yeah. We rented. If mother didn't make them we rented, yeah, yes. So we did have an outlet. That was, in keeping part of our own culture, and absorbing the American.

DANE: Uh-huh. I think that's great. I think we're finished. This is the end of side two, tape two, Maria Oogjen, Interview Number 104. It is 12:05. The end of the interview.