

KECK-107

SAMUEL BIRNBAUM

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POLAND/RUSSIA, 1907

AGE 17

PASSAGE ON "THE AMERICA"

DANE: This is Debby Dane, and I'm speaking with Samuel Birnbaum, on Thursday, December 19, 1985. We're beginning the interview at 3:45. We're about to interview Mr. Birnbaum about his immigration experience from Poland in 1907. He was seventeen years old. Mr. Birnbaum's Interview Number is 107. Mr. Birnbaum, if you would tell me, first off, where you were born, what the name of the town was, and what day you were born.

BIRNBAUM: Well, I was born in a village. I wasn't even born in a town. And, uh, what date, did you say?

DANE: Yes.

BIRNBAUM: At, uh, the 15th of June, 1890.

DANE: Uh-huh. What was the name of the village?

BIRNBAUM: Oblkon.

DANE: Could you spell that? Do you know how to spell that?

BIRNBAUM: Well, O-B-L-K-O-N. Oblkon. That was in the state, in the state of Keltz. Keltz was the name of the state of, uh, that I was born in. Yeah.

DANE: What was the village like? Could you describe it?

BIRNBAUM: The village, uh, was a population of about, uh, I'd say, three hundred. And there were about, let's say, uh, fifteen Jewish people, and that all. And, uh, my father happened to be taking care of the estate that also belonged to a Jewish family by the name of Horowitz.

DANE: Like the pianist?

BIRNBAUM: How's that?

DANE: You know, like the pianist, Vladimir Horowitz?

BIRNBAUM: Horowitz, yeah. That's exactly the name. His salary, uh, his salary consisted of one hundred rubles a year. Of course, with that he got free rent, a very small house and, uh, the roof of the house was covered with straw. And, uh, we had no floor of, uh, wood, uh. like we have in town, it was just plain, uh, good old earth. I slept on a straw covered mattress, a straw filled mattress, should I say. But I slept, uh, better than I do today. Much better. And, uh, the schooling that I got, what they call they Yiddish Chedar, like a parochial school, in the village. We got a, we got a teacher from the town.

DANE: Was he a Jewish teacher?

BIRNBAUM: Oh, sure. Jewish.

DANE: A rabbi?

BIRNBAUM: No. He was not a rabbi. He was just a, a teacher,

that's all. He was a, well, I would say, he wasn't even a teacher. He was a teacher's help, a helper. But for a five year old, six year old, he was okay. And when I got older, let's say, about six, seven years of age, my folks sent me to a, uh, town about, uh, let's see, in American, would be about fourteen miles from the village where I lived. And, uh, I went to school there with a, by a rabbi already. You know, he was, he was a regular teacher. And that's about the only schooling that I got. I never went to a Polish school. I could never write, I could never sign my name in, uh, in Polish. The only, the only way I could sign my name was in Russian, because Russian, Russian was the official language of the country.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. In your home, where you were growing up, did you have many brothers and sisters at that time?

BIRNBAUM: Uh, I had a brother that I, he, uh, he was, he was about seven years older than me. He was the second child that my folks had. And he was, uh, I guess he was working for some, some other Jewish farmer, which was about, oh, fifteen, twenty miles from my village. I got to see him very little. I don't remember him at all. My, uh, sisters, some of them I knew, and some of them went to work, also, at a very early age. I had one sister, she went to Vienna. There was a couple that

came from Vienna to visit with the Horowitz's. And she took a liking to my sister. My sister's name was Fritel. And she took her along to Vienna, and that's, that's all that I saw of Fritel. Of course, I was in touch with her, you know. I knew where she was, and I knew how she was getting along, but I never seen her. And she died about three years ago in South America. She emigrated to South america while I was in the city of Warsaw. So, uh--

DANE: Everyone got around, it seems.

BIRNBAUM: Oh, yeah.

DANE: And the villagers, were they Polish speaking, or were they Russian speaking?

BIRNBAUM: All Polish speaking, Polish. And some, some spoke Russian because Russia was, uh, the boss of the country at that time.

DANE: Uh-huh. And when you were six you went to go to school.

BIRNBAUM: Went who?

DANE: When you were six years old you were sent to go to school in this town close by.

BIRNBAUM: In the town. Six or seven years. I don't remember.

DANE: Did you stay there for long?

BIRNBAUM: Uh, yes. I was there for a couple of years. And I was boarding, boarding with my, uh, mother's father. With my grandfather. His name was Abraham Abramowitz.

DANE: What was your name?

BIRNBAUM: My name was Sam Birnbaum, just the same as it is now.

DANE: But how was it--

BIRNBAUM: My father's name was, uh, Birnbaum. You mean my Jewish name? (He laughs.)

DANE: Yes.

BIRNBAUM: Schmiel. Samuel, Samuel. Yeah. But in Polish it was Samuel, and in Yiddish it was Schmiel.

DANE: Is that what your mother called you? Schmiel?

BIRNBAUM: Yeah. In the old country she called me Schmiel. Yeah. Sure.

DANE: And how long did you study with the rabbi?

BIRNBAUM: With the rabbi, till the age of about, uh, twelve and a half, that's all. Twelve and a half.

DANE: Did you have to work during that time?

BIRNBAUM: Work? No. Not, uh, I didn't start to work till I was about, uh, oh, almost fourteen years of age. In Warsaw. Six months I was working as an apprentice to learn my knitting trade. And after the six months, my folks gave me five rubles in my pocket, five dollars, five rubles. It's only, in american money it would be two and half dollars, five dollars, five rubles. And there was a job waiting for me in the city of Warsaw. The job was pre-arranged by the people that taught me how to knit, you know. And when I got, when I came to Warsaw I went up to the, to the,

to the place where the job was waiting for me, and I went to work. (He coughs.) Pardon me.

DANE: You were only thirteen or fourteen at this time?

BIRNBAUM: I was about, yeah, about fourteen.

DANE: Uh-huh. Did you miss your home? Did you--

BIRNBAUM: Did I miss my home? Naturally. Not much because I was, I was away from home most of the time. I was never at home. I was only home till about five years of age. Then I, they sent me off to the small town nearby the village about fifteen miles, or something like that. And, uh, so I was, I was used to being away from home. Whenever my folks came to the market in the town where they, where they sent me, when they were leaving, I was running after the wagon, the horse and wagon, and I wanted to go back, and I probably cried, and so forth. But, you know, you get used to it. You get used to it. So, uh, that was my childhood.

DANE: And while you were in Poland in the countryside, living

with the teacher, were you aware of the czar and that the pogroms were going on?

BIRNBAUM: Oh, yes. When I was in Warsaw I, uh, I experienced, uh, all the, all that was going on in the country. There was strikes right away, you know, that I knew about, and I, the, some of the working people that got a hold of me, they were trying to make a socialist out of me, and they taught me how to, uh, how to read, uh, some of the little books that were printed there, which was against the law, against the law of the czar. And, uh, that was, that was the beginning of my, uh, of my working days. And, uh, yeah.

DANE: Tell me about what you learned as a knitter. Did you learn on a machine?

BIRNBAUM: That's exactly what I learned. It was a hand machine, operated by hand. The first things that I learned how to knit was stockings, stockings. Then, when I learned how to make stockings, after I knew how to make stockings, I started, they started teaching me how to make gloves, hand knitted gloves. And I was, must say that I was pretty good at it. I was very fast. And that's about all I learned. When I came to Warsaw, then they showed me how to knit all kinds of sweaters and, uh, whatever, whatever it required in the trade.

DANE: Was it a factory in Warsaw?

BIRNBAUM: Sure a factory.

DANE: Big factory?

BIRNBAUM: Yes, yes, yes.

DANE: Would you sit at machines, like, one after the other,
and just--

BIRNBAUM: I only operated one machine. At that time you couldn't
operate any more than one machine because every machine required a one man.
Only one man, it was a one man operation. (He laughs,) Sure.

DANE: How long a day did you work?

BIRNBAUM: Huh?

DANE: How long--

BIRNBAUM: How long a day?

DANE: Yeah.

BIRNBAUM: About ten hours a day. Oh, yeah, yeah. The fellow that
 I, that I worked by, he also, they also, there
 was room and board. I was getting twenty-five dollars
 every six months. Every six months I was getting, and I
 slept on the floor. Swept the floor. I was a regular
 apprentice, you know. The first six months you've got
 to go through that. And I used to bring beer for the,
 for the big guys and, uh, whatever errands they needed.
 Yes.

DANE: Huh. Was it hard, life? Did you think about--

BIRNBAUM: No, it wasn't. As long as I was working. But when I
got laid off, after the six months were up I was laid off, it wasn't so easy
for me to get another job. I was already, I already knew the, the town and,
uh, the city of Warsaw. and, if you care to know the name of the street, it
was Nalefki. It was one of the main streets, I mean business streets, in
Warsaw.

DANE: And you lived there also?

BIRNBAUM: I lived there. Sure. Yeah.

DANE: And neighbors? Was it mostly Jewish people that lived there?

BIRNBAUM: Oh, yeah. Mostly Jewish people. There were some Gentiles, nut mostly Jewish. Warsaw was a, quite a Jewish community.

DANE: Was it a big city at that time?

BIRNBAUM: Oh, yeah. Warsaw was a big city. Warsaw was a big city. Population, at that time, was about, probably, uh, seventy-five, eighty thousand people, maybe more. I don't know exactly. Oh, it was way more than that.

DANE: Was that an adjustment for you as young boy, going to the city?

BIRNBAUM: It sure was. When I came to Warsaw it was the first, first, uh, big city that I was in. The little towns that I used to go to (Yiddish word), to school, to parochial school, compared to Warsaw, was like a little village.

DANE: Was it scary for you at first?

BIRNBAUM: No. Not at all. No. I got acquainted with the boys right away, you know. There was also, it was, it was a big, uh, apartment house. And there was a big yard there. I got acquainted with a fellow at work, and I used to roam around with him. And, uh, it got to be like a home. I didn't miss, I didn't miss my parents, I missed my parents, but I didn't miss them, it was good to come home. I'd go home every six months or so. But, uh, no. It was all right. I didn't know any better, you know.

DANE: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. What about the socialism? Did you, were you attracted to it? Did you go to meetings?

BIRNBAUM: Yes. I did go to a couple of, uh, working, working man's meetings. But after a while I realized, uh, what, uh, what they were preaching about, so I quit. I quit.

DANE: But it must have sounded like a good idea at that time.

BIRNBAUM: You mean to go to those meetings?

DANE: Yeah. What they were saying, and--

BIRNBAUM: Well, I didn't know enough to say whether it was good or bad. But after I realized what they were talking about and we even had a few Russian soldiers that used to come to these meetings, which they took, took a chance, for example, meeting like that.

DANE: Well, did you know you were doing something that--

BIRNBAUM: Yes. After a couple of meetings, I realized that, uh, that it was, uh, against the law. Yes.

DANE: Were they telling, were they talking about workers' rights, and--

BIRNBAUM: Workers' rights and, uh, about a revolution and, uh, how wrong the czar was with treating the people. Something like that. So I knew that there was something, of revolutionary teachings going on, you know.

DANE: Did you imagine that the revolution would happen? I mean, you had already--

BIRNBAUM: Yes, yes. Things got to be so bad in the city of Warsaw, or in Poland in general, that I knew that something had to happen. Yeah.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And were there reports of pogroms going on in Warsaw?

BIRNBAUM: Yeah, sure. As a matter of fact, there were, a pogrom was supposed to take place in the city of Warsaw. But, somehow it, uh, it got sidetracked. Uh, it didn't happen. Because a lot of the Polish people in Warsaw, uh, were with the Jews. They were in sympathy with the Jews. So, uh, when the Russians, uh, when the Russians realized that, uh, it wouldn't be an easy job, so they gave up the idea.

DANE: How did you get wind of it? How did you--

BIRNBAUM: Oh, well, people get, there was always people, uh, you know, watching out for those things. Sure.

DANE: Huh. Huh. Now, if I recall, you had sisters and brothers that were in this country at this time.

BIRNBAUM: No sisters of mine ever got to this country, never. One of them, one of them was in a town nearby there. Her name was Rose. She's not even on the, uh, I don't think that she is on here picture.

DANE: Did you call her Ricia? Did you call her Rose?

BIRNBAUM: Raizel.

DANE: Raizel.

BIRNBAUM: I didn't know the name of. (He laughs.) And, uh, one that was taken to Austria, to Vienna, and, uh, my older sister, Haya, her name was Haya, she was, uh, she was working in a, in a different town, away from, also for a rabbi, a rabbi of the town. And I went to see her once in a while. But I, then I lost track of her and that's all.

DANE: Well, what motivated you, then, at age seventeen, to pick up--

BIRNBAUM: Well, if I, if I reached the age of eighteen I was, I

would have been eligible to go to the, uh Russian army. And I didn't want to do that. So my uncle got a passport for me to go across to Austria. And the, when I came to Austria, I was on my own. Of course, I was in Austria for one year before, before I went to the United States. I worked as a teacher's helper myself in a little village in, uh, Austria. Well, it was called Galicia. Galicia. It was Polish. And I worked there for six months.

DANE: Did you like it there?

BIRNBAUM: Yes. I liked it very much.

DANE: Now, why--

BIRNBAUM: Room and board and a few dollars. Yeah.

DANE: Were you speaking Polish in Galicia?

BIRNBAUM: Yeah. Polish and, and German. Mostly Polish in Galicia. In the cities there was a lot of German spoken. Yeah.

DANE: Why would you leave such a nice place?

BIRNBAUM: Because I had america on my mind. America was on my mind. There was a lot of people that left for the United States ahead of me. Yeah.

DANE: And would you know that-- Here let's move this--

BIRNBAUM: That's all right.

DANE: And would you hear stories about what America was like?

BIRNBAUM: Yeah, sure.

DANE: What would you hear?

BIRNBAUM: Well, people are working, making a living, and uh, the Jewish people were not discriminated against. And, that, you know, that, you have a chance, you have a chance. Where in Poland, uh, it was, it was a very poor life for the Jews. Sure. You couldn't work in the coal mine, you couldn't work on the railroad, you couldn't get a job in any of those, uh, places. The only, the only trade that a Jewish fellow was, either a shoemaker or a cobbler, a tailor. That's about all. Otherwise he could be a painter, but to work in factories, in a bank. Very seldom would you hear that a Jewish man get a job in a bank. It was something out of the

ordinary. (He laughs.)

DANE: Now, when you went to apply for a job, could they tell you were Jewish by your name?

BIRNBAUM: You mean in Poland?

DANE: In Poland.

BIRNBAUM: I never applied in a, for a job in a Polish place. Only among Jews, that's all.

DANE: Huh. You just--

BIRNBAUM: There were no, not that I knew of, there was never a, there was no Polish, uh, knitting mills, that I knew of.

DANE: So it wouldn't even occur to you to go to a railroad, a railroad company and ask for a job?

BIRNBAUM: No, no, no. No. No. A Jew?

DANE: How would they know you were Jewish? Because--

BIRNBAUM: You look like a Jew and you dress like a Jew. A Jew was not allowed to go into certain parts of the city of Warsaw.

DANE: Would there be signs?

BIRNBAUM: I believe there was. Yes, there must have been some signs, because no Jewish boy, unless he was dressed like a Pollack. Unless he had a suit of clothes on, that looked, you know, then he could go in. Otherwise you could not go in dressed as a Jew. No, sir.

DANE: Uh-huh. And everyone sort of knew where the lines were drawn?

BIRNBAUM: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

DANE: So you were always aware of it.

BIRNBAUM: A lot of discrimination at that time. Well, some people, some people were okay and others, uh, yeah.

DANE: So in Galicia--

BIRNBAUM: In Galicia? In Galicia it was, it was a different life.

The difference between living in Galicia, you know, the, uh, the Austrian side of Poland and the Russian side of Poland was like day and night. A, uh, a Galicia, Galician Jew knew how to read and write because he was allowed to go to a Polish German school, mostly Polish, and he, so he would read and write Polish and German. As a matter of fact, the fellow that I worked for, his children were very well educated in German and Polish. They spoke Polish. They didn't speak Yiddish.

DANE: So, here it was such a nice town, why did you want to go to America?

BIRNBAUM: Again, I knew that I was going to go, that I would reach the age of eighteen, and the military always stared me in the face. Sure.

DANE: And then your uncle, did you request, ask, your uncle to send a passport and money and everything?

BIRNBAUM: Nobody sent, I didn't require, the only passport that I

required was to go from Poland to Austria, to Austria. Once I caught, I did not have a passport any more. And when I came to the United States it was not required of me to have a passport. The only, the only mistake that I made, maybe my parents made a mistake but they didn't know, was to have three dollars or four dollars in my pocket and I wouldn't, I wouldn't even need my uncle to take me down from the, from the boat. But I had, I had one quarter in my pocket when I landed here. (He laughs.) And that was not enough. Well, anyhow, I knew that I, because I came with an uncle of mine on the same boat, going to the same place, only he came as a married man with his wife, and he had a few dollars. So when he came home, he let the, uh, family know that I was on the boat. And he knew that I didn't have any money. So I slept in Ellis Island, I believe, one night. And on the next day my uncle came from Irvington, New Jersey. And he took me over to his place.

DANE: Before we leave Galicia, did you take a train, or--

BIRNBAUM: A train? You mean to the boat? Yeah, because I came through Hamburg, Germany. I traveled, first I traveled from the city, from Kracow, to the city, to Mislovich. Mislovich was the, uh, the embarking place to go to Hamburg, where I could get a boat. So I went from Mislovich to some German town that I don't remember. Because I know that I went through the city of Berlin. And, uh, I came to, uh, Berlin, to Hamburg,

Hamburg, Germany, and I stayed there overnight. And the next morning there was a boat ready to go to the United States. And that was the happiest moment of my life, when I heard them say, "All right, America. (Yiddish phrase) America." (Speaks to another party in the room.) You understand? Yeah. (Yiddish phrase.) And I spent fourteen days in the boat.

DANE: Do you remember the name of the boat?

BIRNBAUM: America.

DANE: It was named America?

BIRNBAUM: That's right.

DANE: Oh, no kidding. What did you bring with you? Did you have clothes, or--

BIRNBAUM: Very little clothes.

DANE: Did you bring your featherbed? A lot of people told me that.

BIRNBAUM: No, no, no.

DANE: Do you remember the food that you had on the boat at all?

BIRNBAUM: No. The food was pretty good. Ordinary, uh, nothing special, uh, you know.

DANE: A lot of people say that they remember the herring.

BIRNBAUM: Yeah. Herring, potatoes. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

DANE: Big buckets, really, or barrels, of pickled herring. That, you know, herring for lunch, herring for dinner.

BIRNBAUM: Well, no. Uh, we didn't, no. We had it pretty, pretty good. Yeah.

DANE: Was it a rough crossing?

BIRNBAUM: Uh, at times, at times. In certain spots, sure.

DANE: Did you get sick?

BIRNBAUM: When I, a little. Not much. My, uh, my uncle, and he was a big, husky, strong guy. He was as sick as a dog. But it cleared up after a while. But, uh--

DANE: Were the men and women separated on the boat? Did you used to--

BIRNBAUM: I don't know, I don't think so. Well, we slept on berths, you know. Well, there were very few, uh, married people that came across, and all the single people must have, everybody must have had a berth, you know.

DANE: For leisure, to pass the time on the boat, would you sing, or--

BIRNBAUM: Oh, yeah. We danced , and we wrestled and we, uh, sang songs and, you know, we tried to do the best we can.

DANE: Would you talk about what you were going to do when you got to America?

BIRNBAUM: Well, I didn't have to, uh, to talk about it because I knew what I was going to do. I had a trade in my hands. I was, I was a

full-fledged knitter. I knew that I could knit gloves and stockings, which was demand at that time. Yeah.

DANE: And you arrived, came into New York harbor. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty by any chance?

BIRNBAUM: Yes, I did. I did see the Statue of Liberty and I came, I came to the United States on the 7th of May. I don't remember the day, but it was the 7th of May, all right.

DANE: 1907.

BIRNBAUM: 1907. Sure.

DANE: When you saw the Statue of Liberty, did other people--

BIRNBAUM: Well, I didn't have, didn't have any idea what it, what the Statue of Liberty stood for, but I knew that it was something, something different than all the other skyscrapers, if there were any at that time. There wasn't many. I knew that there was something. Must be something, uh, memorable, something important. Yeah.

DANE: Had you heard stories about, because in 1907 it was still close to the time when they used Castle Garden as an--

BIRNBAUM: Castle Garden? That's it. Instead of Ellis Island. After a while I found out that it was called Ellis Island, too. But Castle garden was the, was the, uh, general name that we all used.

DANE: Uh-huh. Had you heard stories about coming through the immigration center, that people talked about?

BIRNBAUM: Uh, no. No, no. I didn't pay much attention to that. Your coffee must be ice cold.

DANE: No. We're almost done.

BIRNBAUM: I can warm it up a while.

DANE: Sure. Okay. This is the end of side one of Interview Number 107 with Mr. Sam Birnbaum. It's 4:15.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DANE: This is the beginning of side two of Interview Number 107 with Mr. Sam Birnbaum. It's 4:20. We've got you on Ellis Island, you've just gotten off the boat. 1907. Did they, was it very crowded at Ellis Island? Can you remember what it looked like?

BIRNBAUM: It was crowded, yeah. I didn't pay much attention to the crowd, but yeah, if I remember, it was crowded, sure. Sure.

DANE: Did they ask you questions? Do you remember going through any physical exams?

BIRNBAUM: Yeah, well, they asked me, sure, sure. Who, what relatives have I got in the United States, and what, what I can do, what I'm, what can I do if I was making a living, and that's about all.

DANE: And medical exams? Did they check you--

BIRNBAUM: I was examined in, uh, at the, at the, uh, place of embarkation before we got on the boat. But otherwise no. I was in pretty good shape.

DANE: Your uncle left, because you didn't have the money to

get through. Is that right?

BIRNBAUM: That's right. He, he got off the boat ahead of me.
Sure.

DANE: And was that scary when he left you?

BIRNBAUM: No. Because I knew that, uh, it's only a matter of time
that I, that somebody would come and get me. Yes.

DANE: What were you thinking when you were there at Ellis
Island? Did you set foot on american soil?

BIRNBAUM: At that age, and when you are already in the United
States, you are not very worried. You are glad that you, that you are here,
and somehow you'll be okay. You have that feeling, you know. Everything
was loose, free, you know what I mean. It was a good feeling, an excited
feeling. Sure. The thought in your brain, "Oh, I'm in America now." You
saw, you saw colored people for the first time in your life and you saw
people, uh, busy doing all kinds of work. The only thing that was strange
was the language that I, I heard people talk and I didn't know what the heck
they were talking about. I was kind of-- But I knew that I would learn in
time and, uh, I wasn't worried. No.

DANE: This is something, you made me think of it when you said seeing, uh, Black people for the first time. A lot of people remembered having their first banana, first fruit. They'd never seen a banana before.

BIRNBAUM: Never saw a banana or a tomato.

DANE: No kidding.

BIRNBAUM: As a matter of fact, the, first, uh, taste of a tomato that I bought that I was going to have for lunch when I, when I went to work the first morning on Delancey Street, made me sick. I never ate the tomato, and I didn't touch a tomato for, oh, probably six months.

DANE: No kidding.

BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

DANE: Huh. It's funny.

BIRNBAUM: It looked nice, very nice, but when I bit into it I didn't like it at all. Banana, yes. Banana I liked.

DANE: And, uh, someone else said they had their first donut, their first, uh, butter. They never had butter. Now where was that--

BIRNBAUM: Oh, no, butter. I had butter in the old country.

DANE: I wonder where-- Yeah, it seems that all those first impressions, seeing new places and new cars. Cars. Were there many--

BIRNBAUM: I saw, I saw a Ford in one of the towns that I was in, in the old country, from far away. I knew that that was a, what they called, a Yiddish, it goes by itself, it goes by itself. But I knew that that was a Ford. We heard the name Ford in the old country at that time. Yeah. It was, it was very thrilling.

DANE: Yeah. Someone told me once that they didn't know what it was. They thought it was a ghost, I mean, they didn't, they thought it was a devil. That's what someone said. Coming down the street.

BIRNBAUM: I was just thinking of the word in Russian, and I'm going to, I'm going to tell it to you as soon, as soon as I get it, uh, (Russian phrase), (Russian phrase). (Russian word) is alone, without anybody helping you, and (Russian word) means go. (Russian phrase.) It goes by itself. That's it. (Russian phrase.)

DANE: That's good. Yeah, that's right, that's right. So then, from Ellis Island, you went to your uncle's--

BIRNBAUM: Sure. You asked me that. To Irvington, New Jersey. That was a farm. It was a, kind of a, uh, summer resort. People used to, Jewish people used to come out there, you know. It isn't far from New York. It's right near, uh, near Newark, New Jersey. Going down Springfield Avenue in Newark. You been there? All right. So, uh, it was pretty good. He kept me, I was there with him for about, uh, ten days or so. He, uh, he had sent to the, to bath with, uh, with one of the guys that worked for him, and he bought me a second hand suit of clothes, which was, which was a trifle too small on me. I was, I was afraid to bend down. And, uh, gave me few dollars. And, after ten days and, sent me to barber, took a haircut and a shave. I didn't need much of a shave at that age, you know. And, uh, after ten days I went to Patterson, New Jersey, to another aunt of mine, my mother's sister, by the name of Fortinsky. He was a silk, a silk manufacturer, a silk weaving manufacturer. He was a rich man. And there I lived the life of Reilly. Oh, I was there for a couple of weeks, yeah. And from Patterson, New Jersey, I went to New York and, uh--

DANE: Did you get a job?

BIRNBAUM: Looked up a job right away and it was on Canal Street and going to, to the job, I didn't ride, uh, a, uh, horse, horse car. There was horse cars. Not many electric cars running yet on Delancey Street. So I walked. You could walk, New York, from the east. from the east River to the Hudson River, you know, if you're young and strong, what is it. What's it, about, let's say, about a mile and a half, or something like that. It isn't far. That's where I bought the tomato. On Delancey Street there was a lot of guys, peddlers, you know. Used to sell bananas and rolls and corned beef and herring and all that stuff.

DANE: And would they hawk their wares? Would they yell?

BIRNBAUM: Yeah. No. Just, you know.

DANE: Just hang out.

BIRNBAUM: Yeah. It was quiet. Some would, some would call out the, uh, the wares that they have there. But you could see, a roll, bread. So I bought my lunch, and that's where I, that's where I got into the conflict with the tomato. I didn't eat that any more.

DANE: Did you get a job in a knitting mill?

BIRNBAUM: Right away in a knitting mill. I didn't work in any other, in any other trade but the knitting. Sure.

DANE: Was it a Jewish mill?

BIRNBAUM: Uh, no. No, I don't think so. I don't remember the name of it, of the mill, any more.

DANE: And the wages? Were they better wages than in Warsaw?

BIRNBAUM: Well, five dollars a week I made, the first week. It was enough, you know.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. We were just talking about, when the tape was off, you were saying that you learned English in six months?

BIRNBAUM: Uh, well, uh, I could make myself understood, you know.

Yeah. The reason that I learned English so fast because I got it after the, after the first job I didn't work there very long because it was slack, you know, it was season work. I got a hold of an ad in the Jewish Forward. A fellow by the name of Shingleman, wanted a knitter on a, in a small town by the name of

Rosenhan, New Jersey, if you ever heard of that. It's not far from, uh, Vineland. So I took the job. And I came out there. That's where I made friends with the tomatoes again. Because he had a, he had a farm, and he had everything there. Grapes and apples and tomatoes. He had tomato patches, and he had tomatoes there, as big as a fist. So I worked out there for six months. A room and board and a, some, I don't remember how much, uh, the, but I was getting along fine. And that's where I learned English because there was no Jewish spoken there on the farm. Who speaks, uh, Jewish? And I got a hold of this fellow Shrim, by the name of Shrim. We got acquainted, you know. And, and within six months, I won't say that I learned how to speak English in every word, but I could make myself understood.

DANE: Uh-huh. And tell me that stuff again that he gave you, the key to the pronunciation.

BIRNBAUM: If you want to say "what." you say first, "ooh what," or otherwise you say "vhat?" See what I mean? So everything that's. that's spelled with a "w", you have to know to say "ooh" first. "Ooh. Why," instead of "vhy." Every word that starts with a "w" you have to use that,

you have to have that in mind. "Why." He gave me the key, how to reach that, "why." He said because there's a lot of them that, that never get over that. You see a lot of people that can talk English very well. The only thing is that they have that accent. "Tree", "tree", they can't say "tree". Or "three". The tree? There's a difference.

DANE: And would he work with you every day?

BIRNBAUM: Not every day, but whenever, yeah. He wrote me, and then, listen, when you're seventeen years of age your brain soaks up things quicker than, than rain. I don't remember what I had for breakfast yesterday morning, but I remember what I had, uh, fifty years ago, or seventy-five years ago. Those are things that remain with you. You never forget them.

DANE: Huh. America at this point, was still really young. It was before the First World War.

BIRNBAUM: Oh, yeah. Sure. The, the First World War started when I was already ten years in this country. The First World War started in 1914. I was in Seattle, Washington already at that time.

DANE: What provoked you to travel? How did--

BIRNBAUM: I love to travel. But I made sure that in any town that I was going to go to, to, make sure that there is a knitting mill there. Because when I came in, as long as there was a knitting mill, I can always make a few bucks, too.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. How did you get out to Seattle? By train, or--

BIRNBAUM: Of course. No, to Seattle I came by boat from San Francisco. I, before I came to Seattle I was in Canada for one year. I was in Winnipeg for one year. I also, I left Winnipeg because it was too cold. I remember you saying that in New York that it was too cold in New York. Well, in Winnipeg I had a very good job, very good job. I was making, getting a flat salary of twenty-five dollars. And twenty-five dollars, at that time, in Canada, was like three hundred dollars now. You could get a schooner of beer for a nickel, a shot of whiskey for a dime, or fifteen cents. Room and board, most any place, in Canada, five, six dollars a week. Eat as much as you can.

DANE: Huh. Then you said, uh, it's too cold.

BIRNBAUM: Too cold.

DANE: And then you took a train down to San Francisco?

BIRNBAUM: Now, when I left Canada, when I left Winnipeg, I went straight to, uh, San Francisco, alright. I knew that in San Francisco there is a knitting mill, and I wanted to go to San Francisco. You know, it sounded beautiful. And I had that lust for travel. Came to San Francisco, stayed a few days, and, uh, picked up the paper and saw that they wanted knitters. I went up to the, got a job, sure enough, and I went to work. I also did a little gambling in San Francisco and, uh, it didn't do so good. So I. I was kind of on the broke side. Well, San Francisco is not the place for me. too much gambling going on. So, I had a friend of mine, I knew that he was a, a big foreman in a big knitting mill out there. The Saxony Knitting Mill. I wrote a letter to him, sure enough, I got a telegram back. He needed a knitter. He needed a couple of knitters. So I took, uh, yeah, I'm ahead of myself. When I went broke I went to work in a glass factory in San Francisco. A glass factory. I didn't, in the knitting, in the knitting business I couldn't succeed. So I worked for one dollar and seventy-five cents an hour in the glass factory, at night. And I worked there until I

scraped together enough money to go to San Francisco, uh, to Seattle, Washington, on a boat. And that's, I worked there for, I don't remember, a few weeks. Got enough money, I think the boat fare was six, six dollars, yes. And there was a waiter on the boat that I got acquainted with, got acquainted with in, in, uh, in Frisco, before I got on the boat, because I made inquiries already how to, to get on the boat. He said, "You'll be all right. You buy a ticket for steerage," he said, "and I'll put you in a place where you'll be all right." And it was only an overnight ride. So I got on the boat, came to Seattle, Washington on a Friday morning. I left Thursday evening on the boat. Monday morning I was at work, and I was making thirty, thirty-five dollars a week, and got paid in gold. We were on gold standard at that time. I didn't know what gold standards meant, but I-

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DANE: And Seattle wasn't a big town--

BIRNBAUM: Seattle, yeah. It was, uh, yeah. Quite a nice, very good, friendly town. Very good, friendly town. And times were, you know, pretty good, you know.

DANE: When you were taking the trains to get to Canada and things--

BIRNBAUM: In Canada I traveled by train.

DANE: What were they like? 'Cause the trains really were--

BIRNBAUM: The same as, maybe not so sophisticated, but they were okay.

DANE; I mean, the West was still pretty, it was Wild West of America, even then.

BIRNBAUM: Well, the wild west, maybe in certain places, but I couldn't go to, to the wild west, I went to the normal west. Yeah, I traveled by train from Winnipeg, Canada, to San Francisco.

DANE: Then I want to include, before, I don't want to run out, because I want you to tell us that in 1917, when we got involved with the war, you joined the service.

BIRNBAUM: Sure. I was in Philadelphia at that time, when I joined the service. I enlisted, I enlisted in, from Philadelphia. And right after, within the few days, I get a call to, uh, to show up in the , uh, in the, uh,

for service in the army.

DANE: And did you become an American citizen immediately?

BIRNBAUM: In (?), in Maryland, when I was already about, oh, two months in the service. Maybe sooner, I don't remember exactly. Sure.

DANE: Had it ever occurred to you then to get your citizenship?

BIRNBAUM: Well, uh, I had my papers taken out. I declared myself that I wanted to become an American citizen, but it didn't go through yet at that time. It would probably taken another year or so. But when I got into the service, it was, I was, I became a citizen when I, by an act of Congress. When you're in the United States Army you're automatically, automatically have the right to become a citizen. And they swore me in, I don't know how many there was, probably, uh, five hundred or so. "You are now an American citizen, pledge allegiance to the flag," and so on and so forth.

DANE: Was that a good thing? Were you glad?

BIRNBAUM: It sure was. It wasn't, it was just, I was just as

happy as a lark. Why, sure. To become an American citizen meant something. Meant everything.

DANE: Did you think about voting? That now you could vote?

BIRNBAUM: Well, I knew that, sure, that I yeah, yeah. I knew the meaning of voting.

DANE: And, also in 1917, was the Revolution, finally, in Russia.

BIRNBAUM: Yes, yes. Well--

DANE: Did you keep up with it? Did you know what was happening?

BIRNBAUM: Well, yeah. I knew that, uh my prediction came true. Yeah. Yeah, I read about that in the newspapers, that the Russian czar was overthrown and so on and so forth.

DANE: Did you celebrate, or did--

BIRNBAUM: Well, I, I was glad that the people of Russia are

finally free because I, I don't think that I would be able to, to describe the life of a Russian under the czarist system. You didn't wear socks on your feet to put on boots. You had wraparounds, what they call (Russian word). (Russian word), out of a piece of material, to wrap around your feet and put your boots on. You didn't, I didn't wear socks in the old country.

Yeah, maybe, maybe, just before, yeah when I came to Austria I already wore socks. Otherwise-- You didn't wear shoes like these. You wore a pair of boots.

DANE: So things were hard. Did you know other Polish people at that time, and Russian people here in this country, when the Revolution over there happened?

BIRNBAUM: I beg your pardon?

DANE: Yeah, did you know any Polish people and Russian people here?

BIRNBAUM: Here? When I came here?

DANE: During the Revolution in 1917?

BIRNBAUM: Oh, yeah. I knew a lot of people, and Russia, I knew a

lot of Polish people. As a matter of fact, I worked with Polish, with Polish knitters, you know. I worked with Polish knitters, German knitters, and--

DANE: And I'm going to jump to the next stage in your life. You were, I think, maybe thirty-five, when you got married? How old were you when--

BIRNBAUM: When I got married I was almost, uh, thirty-seven.

DANE: Thirty-seven.

BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

DANE: And you settled in Chicago?

BIRNBAUM: Uh, I came to Chicago in 1922. Sixty-three years ago. That's when I stopped traveling.

DANE: And you met your wife. And then your daughter was telling me that the Landsmen Verein.

BIRNBAUM: Yeah. The organization. It's a Landsmen Verein, you

know.

DANE: Describe it for me. Tell me what it was and what you used to do and what it's role was.

BIRNBAUM: Well, I got married in 1927. I got to be a member in about, about '28 or '29, about that time and , uh, we were in existence till about, oh, let's see, seven, eight years ago, which would be in, uh, 1977.

DANE: Uh-huh. That's fifty years.

BIRNBAUM: Well, no. We were only in existence forty-six tears. Forty-six years.

DANE: Ph, forty-six. And who became members? Who--

BIRNBAUM: All Landsmen. You know, people that came from the vicinity of, uh, this fellow, vicinity of that fellow, but they were all Russian, Russian Jews, or Polish Jews. And you get to know one another and you say, "Why don't you join our organization?" And the purpose of, uh, of the organization was to help Israel, or anybody that's in need of, loan, or, a cemetery, or up against, you need a favor, or something like that. Sure.

DANE: How many people were, were part of it? Was it a big, or forty, fifty--

BIRNBAUM: No, we were about seventy-five or a hundred people at that time, yeah. We used to run fairs, you know, card parties, to make money, you know. Like any other organization. Sure.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And your daughter was telling me that there would be a big picnic every summer.

BIRNBAUM: We would go to picnics practically every Sunday when, when the weather was okay. Yeah.

DANE: Did you have a role in going out and putting up the tables? I mean she said it was--

BIRNBAUM: I used to get up, I used to get up five o'clock in the morning to the park that we selected, and we got a permit to have a picnic. I'd go out there in the morning and set up the tables and make everything ready for the, for the people to come out and enjoy a day of, uh, sure. Sure. Oh, yeah.

DANE: And food?

BIRNBAUM: And food. Everybody would bring, uh, something, you know. Yeah. Some fellows would bring, would pick up some ice on the way, tea, or a gas stove to fry stuff or whatever you want, make hamburgers and chicken and-- But most everybody that came to the picnic brought along, uh, food.

DANE: And you would speak-- You'd have meetings once a week, once a month?

BIRNBAUM: Uh, twice a month.

DANE: Twice a month.

BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

DANE: And would you get together and speak Polish? Yiddish? English?

BIRNBAUM: No. All in English. All in English. Of course, there's some Jewish words that are used or so, but officially it was all in English. The minutes were written in English and we had some, some, uh, women that were married to some of the fellows that were more Americanized

than others. They kept the books, yeah.

DANE: And what function did it serve for you and your family?
Was it an important part of your life, or not so important? The Landsmen Verein. Was it an important thing for you?

BIRNBAUM: Well, yes, it was. In the first place, it was for enjoyment. We had someplace to go. We'd play a little cards, stay out till twelve o'clock or so. Sometimes later, too. It wasn't a big game, but it was enough to pass the time away, that's all. We had a doctor in the Landsmen, that belonged too, that we'd go to, if we were sick or something. Yeah.

DANE: And some of your causes were Israel? I'd see this, uh, trees that were, uh--

BIRNBAUM: That was donated by the Landsmen Verein honoring me with twenty trees that were planted in Israel. Somebody in Israel would plant those trees because there was some money sent there in honor of my, uh, eightieth birthday.

DANE: And this is usually my final question. I don't know, some people had things to say about it, and others don't. But it's, coming from Poland at seventeen you were pretty, you were a young adult at that point.

BIRNBAUM: I was just as big as now, only I didn't have the stomach that I do.

DANE: (She laughs.) What does it mean for you to be an American now, looking back at your life? When did you first feel that you were an American? What does that mean for you?

BIRNBAUM: From the first minute that I got here I realized that I am in a country where I am a free man. I have a chance to, I have a fighting chance, to making a living. That means everything. Sure. It meant, it meant, nit, I didn't realize it as much as I do now, but at that time, already, it was a, it was a big thrill. Sure. Yeah.

DANE: Can you think of anything else?

BIRNBAUM: I can think of a million things but, uh, we, I could sit here, people were going to write a book about me, but, uh, that, it didn't materialize because the

newspaper that was supposed to, to do the writing, did not materialize. But, uh, otherwise, somebody was going to write a book. Of course, there were different questions. I could, I wouldn't go into it now. It isn't necessary. I mean-- Sure.

DANE: Okay. Let me slate the end. This is the end of side two, with Mr. Sam Birnbaum, Interview Number 107. It's 4:50.