

KECK-109

MARY A. HARRIS

BIRTH DATE: APRIL 30, 1906

INTERVIEW DATE: DECEMBER 17, 1985

RUNNING TIME: 30:00

INTERVIEWER: NANCY DALLETT

RECORDING ENGINEER: A. RANDALL

INTERVIEW LOCATION: CHICAGO, IL

TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1986

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TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

BELGIUM, 1914

RESIDENCE: MERXSEN

AGE 8

US RESIDENCE: CHICAGO, IL

PASSAGE ON "THE MAURITANIA"

PORT OF EMBARKATION: LIVERPOOL

DALLETT: My name is Nancy Dallett and I'm speaking with Mary Harris on Tuesday, December 17, 1985. We are beginning this interview at 3:05 PM and we're about to interview Mrs. Harris about her immigration experience from Belgium in 1914. This is Interview Number 109, side 1. Why don't you take me back to the beginning of your story and tell me when and when you were born?

HARRIS: I was born, uh, April 30th, 1906.

DALLETT: And where was that?

HARRIS: Merxsem.

DALLETT: Merxsem. Could you help me spell that?

HARRIS: M-E-R-X-S-E-M.

DALLETT: M-E-R-X-S-E-M.

HARRIS: Yes. Antwerp, Belgium.

DALLETT: In Belgium?

HARRIS: Yeah.

DALLETT: And can you tell me a bit about your family life? Uh, do you have brothers and sisters?

HARRIS: Uh, I have a sister, but she passed away when she was eighteen, a year and a half, old. And I was an only child after that. I lived with my cousins and my aunts and uncles in the same building, went to school with them, uh, went to Catholic school. And I still don't remember too much about the, uh, about the school. I don't remember the nuns or the

sisters, whatever you want to call them. Uh, but I remember going into a wide street, a beautiful street, and coming home for lunch, uh, through the, uh, graveyard in back of the church. And the same in the afternoon, four o'clock in the afternoon. And then I would play outside just like the kids in America do. And, uh--

DALLETT: What did your father do there?

HARRIS: My father, he was a longshoreman, he was a Merchant Marine. He worked in a glass factory. He also worked in the ammunition factory. And, uh, finally he got, in 1914 he, no, in 1912 he decided to come to the United States and he was a fireman on the Lapland. It's a german boat. And, uh, he made the trip across being a fireman, come back to Belgium, told my mother that he wanted to go to the United States and live there.

DALLETT: Oh. Why?

HARRIS: Because work in Merxsem was getting very scarce and he had heard, uh, around the dock that there was going to be a war. And with that he decided to come to the United States. And he told my mother it was about time that they got out of there. He couldn't find any work there anyhow. So that's why we came to the United States. But we wrote, my

mother had brother here, wrote to them. And, uh, how the, how the exact, uh, the financial trip was made, I don't exactly know. But anyhow, they said it would be all right to come and, uh, it must have been right after, right after my birthday. My birthday was the thirtieth, and we left about the ninth of May.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. So did you know, uh, you said your mother had a brother here.

HARRIS: Yes.

DALLETT: Do you know how many years he had been living in this country? Did you know him from--

HARRIS: I didn't--

DALLETT: You didn't know him as a child.

HARRIS: No. No, I didn't. I didn't know him.

DALLETT: Did you ever know anyone from, from, uh, your village to come--

HARRIS: Yes, one man. Just one man. And he was on the same, same ship with us.

DALLETT: So you didn't know anyone who had come before?

HARRIS: No. No.

DALLETT: Did you have, had your father told you stories about what life in America was going to be like? Did he have any--

HARRIS: No. He was just in New York City. That was the only place he went. They weren't allowed to travel, not when you're working on a, on the ship. And, uh--

DALLETT: Did he tell you anything about what he had seen in New York? Did you have any impressions?

HARRIS: No, I hadn't. None whatsoever. He went to the little brown church. That's what I remember, that he went there. And, uh, they gave him a place to sleep and something to eat. And then he would go back to the ship. And then the next trip he came home. And that was right after New Year's in 1913. And that's when he told my mother that he wanted to come to the United States and lived in the, there would be work here for us.

Then, uh, mother's, my mother sold all her furniture and everything and we prepared to come to the United States.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. Do you remember, uh, when you were actually leaving home? Did you say goodbye to your uncles and your--

HARRIS: Oh, yeah. I said goodbye to everybody and they all cried. My grandmother cried and my aunts and uncles, they were all there, and they all said goodbye. That was the last time I saw them.

DALLETT: And so your mother sold off her things.

HARRIS: Sold off her things and--

DALLETT: Did she keep some special things to bring with her? Do you remember--

HARRIS: Not that I remember. Not that I remember. I think we traveled very lightly.

DALLETT; But you came together, the three of you?

HARRIS: Yes, the three of us. And we crossed the English Channel. We stayed overnight in Liverpool and, uh, then we went to, uh, to the ship in Liverpool, the Mauritania. I've got a poster of it in my bedroom.

DALLETT: Oh. I'd like you to show that to me later on.

HARRIS: All right.

DALLETT: Do you, uh, do you know whether you'd had to go through any sort of, uh, examinations or anything like that while still in Belgium, or in England?

HARRIS: Not that I can remember, or not in England either.

DALLETT: Okay.

HARRIS: Uh, we, uh, on board ship we, uh, it was, uh, nice. It was just like a tour. We came over on tourist, uh, voyage. And, uh--

DALLETT: Was it a very large ship?

HARRIS: Yes, it was. It was the sister ship of the Lusitania.

And I had dinner with the captain.

DALLETT: How did that come about?

HARRIS: Well, he went to look at everybody and for some unknown reason he picked me. And, uh, my friend, uh, the friend of my family, why, he'd come along, too. My mother was sick during the whole trip. (Husband speaks.) Sister ship. Right. And we had a nice time in the evening. There were a lot of Swedish people there. And, uh, they, they were all nice and friendly and one had an accordion. We danced on the deck. And then, what did they call it? Called the hatch dance, where they open up the, uh, you know, that round thing where they keep the steerage?

DALLETT: The hatch?

HARRIS: The hatch?

DALLETT: The hull?

HARRIS: The hull. (Husband speaks.) No, no, a ladder, at that time. A ladder at that time. And there were people down there with the steerage. And one woman, there were three women down there, and they had a babushka on, they had a long apron on. There were three down there. There

was a little girl down there. There was a man with a beard, and there was a cow. There were two goats. The other one, I think, was a lamb. I, I don't--

DALLETT: So passengers were actually traveling with the cows and the--

HARRIS: Yeah. But they were down below.

DALLETT: In the hull.

HARRIS: In the hull. Uh, -- (husband speaks.) Down the hatch.

DALLETT: Right.

HARRIS: And there was, uh, straw down there. And then, in the morning, they would lift this, uh, thing up. And they would go, go someplace and wash and, uh, empty their boots. But what was in their boots, I don't remember. I don't remember what was in their boots. But that's what they did. Then they threw it overboard. And, uh, then I wasn't allowed to see it afterwards any more. That was the first time I saw that, and after that I was not allowed to see any more.

DALLETT: Did it seem strange to you, you were curious?

HARRIS: Very strange. Not curious. It was, it just didn't appeal to me.

DALLETT: Yeah.

HARRIS: And, the rest of the voyage was just wonderful, except one night when, uh, oh, about eleven o'clock, eleven thirty, why, there was a rumble in the, uh, in the boat that, uh, the passengers were all upset and we had to get out life preservers on. And, I heard this friend of ours say that there was, uh, a submarine sideswiped our ship. But whether it was a submarine or not, I just don't remember, but it was another boat that sideswiped our ship. And, uh, oh, after about an hour everything was okay, and we just went on ahead. And it was a lovely trip afterwards, just, just wonderful. That's how we got to Ellis Island.

DALLETT: How many days were you on--

HARRIS. I believe, we left there the ninth, we left (?) on the 9th of May, and we reached Chicago on the 25th. Now, whether it took nine days on the boat or not, I just don't remember.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. You don't recall stopping at any ports or, to unload cargo, or anything like that?

HARRIS: No. We went straight to New York. And how my dad got, uh, got them to know where the station was, the train depot, I have no knowledge. I have, I just can't, even today I don't know how he got the knowledge of going to, uh, a certain station or depot where the train was so we could come to Chicago. And even today I can't figure it out. (They laugh.) And then, uh--

DALLETT: Do you remember when you came into the harbor at all, when you landed in New York? Was there any--

HARRIS: The only thing my dad did was take me to-- This friend of ours, he took me to the railing and showed me the Statue of Liberty. And that's about the only thing that I can remember.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. Had you know to expect the Statue of Liberty?

HARRIS: No, no.

DALLETT: Never heard of that.

HARRIS: Nobody ever said anything. My dad spoke to my mother about it, but as a little girl, who cares.

DALLETT: Right.

HARRIS: So--

DALLETT: Tell me what happened when, when you came into Ellis Island. What happened there? Do you remember the, the physical building at all, when you first saw it?

HARRIS: It seemed to me as though it was a long building and it had black, uh, benches with backs on them. And there were people sitting there, and pretty soon a man with a long coat came over and took my mother into a compartment and she was examined there. So was my dad examined, and I was too. And pretty soon this long man, he took me by the hand and went, he took me, a tour, and introduced me to all the doctors. Why he did that I don't know, because what's a doctor to me when I was a little girl. But he did, and he introduced me to all the doctors and, uh, whatever went on, whatever they said, I don't know, but they shook hands, they shook my hands and, uh, they patted me on the head. That all there was to it. In fact, then we went onto another little boat, and by that time we were ready to get on the train.

DALLETT: Tell me, uh, what language were you speaking when you came in?

HARRIS: Flemish.

DALLETT: Flemish. And what language would the doctor have been speaking when he--

HARRIS: I believe he was speaking English. Yes.

DALLETT: So you couldn't understand one another.

HARRIS: I couldn't understand.

DALLETT: Do you know, uh, do you remember the actual examination itself, how that proceeded?

HARRIS: They looked into our mouths and, uh, tested our heart. And that's about all I can remember. About all.

DALLETT: Okay.

HARRIS: In fact, I don't even remember being examined.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. Okay.

HARRIS: But I know my mother did, and so did, because she was sick on the boat, she was sick the entire trip. Seasick. And she really went through an examination, but she was fine. She was okay. It was just that she was seasick, that was all.

DALLETT: And do you know whether there was a translator that would have helped your mother communicate with these doctors and the officials?

HARRIS: No. There was no translator.

DALLETT; No?

HARRIS: No.

DALLETT: So you don't know how they--

HARRIS: I have no idea. I have no idea. Because when I was on this tour with the doctor, evidently somebody must have talked to them or

even this friend of my, of the family talked to them. And, uh, because when I come back my mother was worried about me.

DALLETT: Because you had been taken away?

HARRIS: I'd been taken away.

DALLETT: And who was this friend of the family that you mentioned?

HARRIS: Uh, his name is, uh Jan. Well, it's, uh, S-M-I-T-T.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. And he had come from--

HARRIS: He was, uh, yes. And he was here in the United States first.

DALLETT: Oh, he had already been here.

HARRIS: He had already been here.

DALLETT: So he was, I'm sorry, he was meeting you at Ellis Island, or he was again traveling?

HARRIS: No, no. He, uh, he came back to Chicago from, from Merxsem.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. Okay. Uh, did your mother and father, do you know, did they have to show that they had a certain amount of money in order to come in? Do you know?

HARRIS: Yes.

DALLETT; They did.

HARRIS: Yes. But I don't know, I don't remember how much.

DALLETT; Uh-huh. But you do remember they did have to have--

HARRIS: They did have, uh-huh.

DALLETT: Do you remember whether they had to exchange money on Ellis Island for American dollars, or anything like that?

HARRIS: I don't remember that. No, I don't remember that at all.

DALLETT: Okay. Anything else you can fill in about what happened

on Ellis Island. How many hours were you there? Just an afternoon?

HARRIS: Oh, dear. Well, we, uh, you might say the afternoon. I don't even remember eating there, or having something to eat. I don't even remember that. I don't even remember how we traveled, uh-- Look, 1914, you know.

DALLETT: It's a long time ago.

HARRIS: I don't even remember how, how we got to the depot. It's way beyond me, how we got there.

DALLETT: Yeah. Do you remember seeing anything of, I think the building might have been bigger than any building you might ever have been in before? Do you remember seeing anything?

HARRIS: Yeah. No, I, uh, it seemed to me, although there were long windows and, uh, the woodwork was black, too.

DALLETT: Did you hear, were you hearing different tongues?

HARRIS: Well, there were different people. There was a number of people there. There must have been about, as far

as I can remember, about a hundred people there. They had come, there was three hundred people on the ship that we came on. So, and they all had to come to Ellis Island if they were immigrants. And, if they were the United, born here, of course, they didn't have to. But they all had to be on Ellis Island and all had to be examined. But I just don't remember any of them being examined.

DALLETT: Okay.

HARRIS: This doctor. you know, he took me all over. I don't know what went on inside afterwards. I just met these doctors and that's all there was to it. And the doctor patted me on the head and he went like this and he pinched my cheek. And, uh, that's all, about, I can remember.

DALLETT: (She laughs.) Okay. So you're not sure how you got from Ellis Island to the train station.

HARRIS: No.. I have no idea. I have absolutely, I have absolutely no idea how we got there.

DALLETT: But somehow your father negotiated that.

HARRIS: He, he sure did. He, I have no idea how we got there. Unless this friend of ours, he, uh, described how to go there, or to take a cab or something. I have no idea. But in 1914 a cab, you know, there was obviously question.

DALLETT: So, do you remember, uh, what happened next? You got on a train, then, and came out to Chicago?

HARRIS: To Chicago. And, we got off, uh, the depot was at Van Buren Street. Van Buren, the South Street Station. Van Buren and, uh, oh, gee.

DALLETT: It's okay.

HARRIS: We were at Van Buren Street Station, anyway. It's, uh, Van Buren and something. (Other voices speak.) Uh, no. The other side of Franklin. That's what it is. Yeah.

DALLETT: Okay. The South Street Station. Okay.

HARRIS: And we got on the streetcar there with our, my uncle was

there to meet me, my mother's brother was there to meet us. And we got on a streetcar and came to, uh, his house.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. So he was settled already here in Chicago.

HARRIS: He was settled already. In fact, he had his own home.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. So, do you remember, was that like a nice reunion for your mother to have her brother back?

HARRIS: Very much so. Very much so. It was the oldest of her family, there were seven in her family and he was the oldest. And, uh, they were very, very happy to see each other. And they had a job for my dad right away. He worked in a laundry and my dad, my mother did too. My mother worked in a laundry, too.

DALLETT: So he helped to set them up.

HARRIS: He helped to set us up, yeah.

DALLETT: And, uh, let's see. You were how old at that point in time?

HARRIS: Then, I was eight years old. I had my last birthday in Belgium.

DALLETT: And were you enrolled in the public school system once you--

HARRIS: Yes.

DALLETT: Do you remember those first few years of school?

HARRIS: Uh, yes. I went to Healy School. It's on 31st and Wallace.

DALLETT: And how was that for a young girl? You were speaking Flemish. How did you pick up you English?

HARRIS: Yeah.

DALLETT: Was it difficult?

HARRIS: It sure was. It was, because when I was in Belgium we were studying French, French and, uh, and I didn't even know the, uh, how to say the A-B-C's in Flemish. (She laughs.) So it was quite, uh, difficult,

for me to study English. But I got through it. Uh, uh, instead of going into third grade I went right into first grade. So, uh, and then we, uh, we moved from, from that part of the city, uh, we moved to 5832 Blackstone. That's just about four blocks from here, five blocks, maybe. And then we moved to 52nd and Harper. And then we moved to 5707 Blackstone. We, I stayed there until I got married.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. Did your, did your uncle have children? Did you have cousins--

HARRIS: Yes. He had four. He had two boys and two girls.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. And they were born in this country?

HARRIS: No, they were born there.

DALLETT: In Belgium?

HARRIS: In Belgium.

DALLETT: Okay. So did they help you to pick up the language, since they were here longer?

HARRIS: No, because they were already, uh, going to high school or going to work.

DALLETT: They were older.

HARRIS: Uh-huh.

DALLETT: I see.

HARRIS: In fact, the youngest one, she, uh, oh, she must have been ten, ten years older than I.

DALLETT: Do you remember anything about that period when you were first getting situated and settled in Chicago, anything that struck you as really strange as compared to what life was like in Belgium?

HARRIS: Oh, naturally, I didn't have my cousins to speak with in Flemish. Uh, my cousins here, they knew how to speak English and they had forgotten their Flemish. And, uh, bit I got acquainted with a little boy on the same street and, uh, an Irish family. James Lynch. And he helped me. I used to babysit for him. I couldn't speak to him, but we played together.

DALLETT: Uh-huh.

HARRIS: And, uh, I don't remember whether he went to, no, he went to Catholic school. He didn't go to Healy School.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. Was there ant time that, uh, were you introduced to anything new in this country that you hadn't seen in Belgium, or was life pretty much--

HARRIS: Yes. When I was here, let's see, we came here in May, and in August, uh, this Mr. Lynch's, uh, cousin took me to Seneca, Illinois, on the farm. I had never seen anything of a farm before. I knew what a cow was like, but I didn't know what the farm was like.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. How did you feel about it? Did you--

HARRIS: Wonderful.

DALLETT; Yeah. You liked that?

HARRIS: Very much so. Very much so. They played in the haystacks. I never played in a haystack. I, uh, never had milk out of, uh, fresh from the cow. And, uh, it was all very, very nice. I enjoyed it.

DALLETT: And how many years was it until you felt, uh, that you were really used to America, and felt more like an American?

HARRIS: I fell right in.

DALLETT: Right away.

HARRIS: I had no problem here at all. I fell right in.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. And tell me about citizenship. Did your father-

HARRIS: I got naturalized from my dad.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. And when was that, that he--

HARRIS: September, in 1922. I think it was second, 22nd of September. Want to see them?

DALLETT: Yeah. I'd like to see those pictures, yeah.

HARRIS: Uh, do you know where they're at? (Other voices.) Uh, do you know where all my cards are in the desk?

DALLETT: Hold on one second. Let me just ask you one more question.

HARRIS: Okay.

DALLETT: Uh, the question is, could you say just what kind of papers you do have. Do you have anything like your ship's card or anything like that?

HARRIS: Not the ship's card but, uh, I have my mother's, uh, license, marriage license, and the birth certificates.

DALLETT: Okay. For you, birth certificate?

HARRIS: Uh-huh.

DALLETT: Okay. Anything to do with the trip itself, uh--

HARRIS: No.

DALLETT: Visa, passport?

HARRIS: Uh, I had my dad's, uh, book from the, being a fireman.

But whatever happened to it I don't know.

DALLETT; Okay.

HARRIS: That was the Lapland, Lapland that he was on.

DALLETT; Okay. I think I've asked you everything I need to.

HARRIS: I think so. Yeah. Thanks.

DALLETT: Uh, thank you very much, and that is the end of side one and the end of Interview Number 109 with Mary Harris and it is 3:35.