

KECK-116

IRVING (ISRAEL) CHAIT

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RUSSIA, 1913

AGE 10

DANE: This is Debbie Dane and I'm speaking with Irving Chait on February, Friday, January 10th, 1986. We're beginning the interview at 4:30 PM. We are about interview Irving Chait about his immigration experience from Russia in 1913. He was ten and a half years old and this is Interview Number 116. Mr. Chait, if you would tell me, let's start at the beginning, what day you were born and in what town.

CHAIT: I was born July 17, 1902.

DANE: And where?

CHAIT: Nutyan. Nutyan.

DANE: How would you try to spell that?

CHAIT: Well, that would be N-U-T-Y-A-N.

DANE: Is that a province of Russia?

CHAIT: Well, it's, it was a very, very small town in Russia. This  
is all Russia. I was never, I was never anywhere's  
else.

DANE: What is Rezista?

CHAIT: Rezista is a place where we lived later on.

DANE: Oh, I see, I see. How long, did you grow up, did you live  
in that town that you just mentioned?

CHAIT: When I was a very small boy. I was born there just, I  
don't know exactly how long, but it was very little, very little time.

DANE: So then you spent your first ten years more in Rezista?

CHAIT: Well, uh, you want to take it off for a while? (Break in tape.)

DANE: Okay. You were just telling me, when you were three and a half years old your father--

CHAIT: My, father, my father came to America and , uh, he stayed here about, I would say, about, the exact time I don't know. It would be about two years or maybe two and half years. And he wanted to bring the family over to this country. Of course, he seemed to be very much in love with America. But my, my mother didn't want to leave her parents and he friends and her family and she persuaded him to come back. He came back. I was, at that time, about five and half years old, and he went to a small town called Korsivka and he opened up a leather shop in partners with my uncle. That is, uh, the brother-in-law of my father's. He was a shoemaker. He also made trips forth and back to this country as well. And they were doing very, very well. Of course, in those days, there was such a thing as a shoe store. In other words, you bought your leather and had shoes made to order. And they were doing very, very well. Just stop for a minute. (Break in tape.) Well, one day a young man came in. He was related to my uncle and he says he wants a job as a shoemaker to make shoes and he was hired. He worked there about, I don't know, about a year and a half or so.

There was something mysterious about him which we couldn't find because we couldn't find anything wrong with him. He appeared to be a very nice fellow. Until one day it seemed to be there was a fire in the store. It didn't do any damage. Of course, it seemed that he tried to put the fire out, but of course he left, he left town and he never, we never heard from him again. One night, while we were asleep, there's a knock on the window and, of course, it, it was quite a knock, too. My father went to the window and there are soldiers with guns. "Open up." Well, he opened up and he said, "What is this all about?" "Don't ask ant questions." And they got us all out of bed, ripped open the bedding and they were looking. Of course, we didn't know what it was all about. Well, they didn't find anything in the bedding, but they took every piece of mail that was in the house they took along with them and my mother happened to save all the letters that she corresponded with my father when he was in this country. They took everything. And we didn't know what it was all about. And, of course, they left. About six months later we, we get a letter from the post office to come down. They, they have, they have all the mail that they took from us back. It happened to be that I went with my mother and sure enough they gave us quite a stack of it, and it was all the mail, all the mail that they took. And every letter was stamped. They went through every one of them. Then we found out what it was. This young man that worked in the store, happened to be that he was, he was a, what they at that time a Bolshevik, and he used to around to the peasants and talk to them for the Revolution.

We didn't know anything about it. And, of course, our name was freed, we got all our stuff back, and that was that.

DANE: Do you have any idea why they took your letters, what they-

CHAIT: Because, don't you see, he worked, he worked for my father and my uncle and it's a case where, you see, it seemed that he had all, that fire that I'm talking about, he burnt up all the literature, see. He burnt up all the literature.

DANE: So it was the czar's people that were coming to try and find him through you?

CHAIT: Oh, yes. That was, the czar, of course, that was under the czar. Because, when I, when I left, when I left in 1913, of course, the czar was in power. Well, anyway, that was that. After that, from then on, from that time on, my father, some how or other his, his mind was always United States. Well, one day, of course, he made up his mind, although he really had a wonderful life there. That's one thing I'll say. We didn't, we didn't feel any anti-Semitism because it was really a very nice life. And he really had an easy life because he would open up the store in the morning, close it in the evening and then have it

free. And, of course, being Jewish, Saturday it was closed. And we really had a wonderful life.

DANE: No pogroms, no--

CHAIT: No, we didn't, not in our section. That's one thing we didn't have. Well, he made up his mind and he went back with my uncle and it's the case where, let's see, that was during the time of the Russian-Japanese War, I think. I don't know exactly what year it was, but I believe that's what it was. And he, he happened to get a job in a, in a leather factory. He worked very hard. In the first place, it was dirty work, but he'd rather do hard, dirty work than to be in Russia, you know, be, being a (?). Well, of course, I suppose, in the meantime, he saved a little money and, uh, and he sent for us. At a time when, when, when he came to this state of Korsivka, that town, he also, he also bought, uh, three houses and a tremendous big orchard and also quite a bit of land. And, you see, in Russia, a Jew had no right to own land or property. So what you had to do is have some Gentile fellow buy it for you and have an agreement that he, that it was yours, see, but he was getting some kind of a, some kind of a rent for it. And it was really a beautiful place but he just didn't want any part of it.

DANE: Because of America? Because he--

CHAIT: He, he wanted this country. And then there was something else. He realized that by us growing up, we couldn't get any education there, being Jewish. And then there's another thing. You take, a Jew was not, was not permitted to live in a big city. The small city, what could a, say, a young man do anything? He had nothing to do. And most, most of the Jewish boys, either they, they became tailors or, or, let's see, shoemakers. And then, of course, to learn the trade, they had to be, they had to work, do any kind of work for the tailor. Help the wife with the kids and everything else and all he would get, all he would get is, is just his keep, and maybe give him a ruble or two once in a while and, of course, that was all I, some of the boys that were a little bit more advanced, so what they would is take, take a basket with soap, needles and the likes of that, you know, that the, that the peasants, away from the city, they needed that. They didn't have any money. So he, he would get through giving them that, and they would give him eggs and chickens and things like that. And, of course, some of them, after a while, would even buy a horse and a wagon and do it on a big scale. And, of course, they would leave on a Sunday morning, they's have to be back Friday night, being religious Jews, and that was really the life of most, most of the young men over there.

DANE: Were there schools? Were there any small rabbi schools?

CHAIT: Well, there, there was school, but, there was school, but nothing to talk about. They, the schools, up to a little bit higher, they call gymnasium. That was supposed to be-- But first place, most of the people couldn't afford, and then again, you had to, you had to be in a big city. They couldn't even afford to be there or to live there.

DANE: So there wasn't, say, a rabbi in your town that had school?

CHAIT: Oh, yes. We, we had a rabbi. Yes, see, I as far as, Jewish boys, they used to go to Hebrew school. Yes, we had a rabbi, surely. But I mean outside of a rabbi, we couldn't, we didn't have any education that we could take advantage, say, in the Russian language, or so. Although everyone spoke Russian.

DANE: Did you?

CHAIT: Well, I tell you, I, I spoke, but I forgot quite, I forgot most of it.

DANE: But your mother could speak Russian?

CHAIT: Oh, yes. My older sister, she could speak Russian very well, very well. Well, let's see now--

DANE: Before you get concentrated, how was the relationship between the peasants, the Gentiles and the Jewish families in your town? Was it good?

CHAIT: In, in, where we lived, it was very, very good relationship. We had very good relationship. And, of course, because, see, there's something else. In Russia, we didn't have such a thing that if you had any kind of a contract you'd go to a lawyer. Over there, if you shook hands, that was a contract. And let me tell you it was never broken. Now, you take my grandfather, he, he had, he lived away from the city, and he had an inn. Then again, of course, he was, he was quite a businessman, too. He'll take, uh, he had this place so it's a case where, of course, he had a big garden, this is, of course, food for your family. Then again he, he bought the milk from the fellow that owned the cows, but the thing was this way. The milk that the cows gave belonged to my grandfather, but my grandfather had to take, that is, not he, but the girls, there were four girls, they would take peasants and go with them where the cows were to milk. The, again, the milk was taken by the boys. There were four boys there, too, that would take it to the city to sell it. He didn't sell, he didn't sell, he didn't bother with this, or he didn't bother with, that was the family, had to take care of it. When it came September, when the apple season is, he wouldn't go, he would go into these people. Of course, they

were all peasants. And he'd say, "How much you want, say, for the apples in this orchard?" And he'd come to a price and, of course, shake hands, and that was the contract. Then he would hire some peasants to take the apples off the tree, and then he would also get lumber to, to box them, to make cartons, or crates. And then again it seemed he had some connection with Germany that he would, he would send them to Germany. So after they were crated he had to take them to the railroad to ship them there. But that was not the only thing. He would also, he would also, at a certain time of year, as he was buying up the geese and ducks, and somehow he had connection where he would also ship them, I mean most of it went to Germany. Then, a certain time of the year, he would buy up the, the, uh, the skins of the animals, you know. And, of course, also-- And he was doing exceptionally well. He was very well liked by all the peasants around there because sometimes a peasant would get so drunk and if he didn't have any money to buy another bottle of vodka so he would say, "All right. Take my horse." He needed a horse to get around, but he didn't have the money. They knew that if he came to my grandfather that he, that he would straighten it out.

To the extent of where I must, I must really show you exactly the part that, that we live, was, that was Russia, but, then again, when their revolution came along, it's the case where they called it Latvia. You heard about it? And I don't know whether many Americans know about what, how Latvia came into existence. And maybe the name Karinsky was the one that was head of Latvia. As a matter of fact. (Wife speaks off mike.) All

right. Thank you. I have a good wife. So, see, he, he came here to this country, he thought maybe that he can get Latvia back again, but he never did. And then, when he came into power, so it seemed that it was, a sign of a little anti-Semitism. And there were some people that wanted to get my grandfather out from the inn and, of course, someone else would take it over. And all the peasants, miles and miles around, came over and say, "If Mr. Frumerman is not going to be here," he says, "Nobody else is going to be here." And of course, you know, they put up quite a big fight, and he remained. It shows how he was loved by everybody.

DANE: He was an incredible businessman, but it was all pertaining to the farms and agrarian things. But your father saw that you guys, as children, wouldn't have that opportunity.

CHAIT: No. The thing that he, for the time that he came here, the first time, it seemed that he saw that this is, this is the place for us. It must, it must have been something that he, he just fell in love, because he worked very, very hard, exceptionally hard.

DANE: Was your mother crazy about the idea of leaving Russia?

CHAIT: No, she wasn't. No, she wasn't. She wasn't. Because after her family and I'll tell you, it was really a loveable family, loveable family. Uncles and aunts, they were really wonderful, they were really wonderful.

DANE: How did it come, then? Your father had come back here, made up his mind that he should bring his family over.

CHAIT: Yes, yes.

DANE: Did he write with visas and passports and tickets?

CHAIT: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. He sent, he sent us everything.

Surely. I suppose he saved a little money, although salaries in those days were very low. But he sent us everything and then there's something else. You see, when he sent us, when he told us that, that he wants us over so, of course, we had to go to doctors because this country wanted only healthy people here. So they found that my mother's eyes were bad. They call it trachoma. Maybe you heard of the expression? So, of course, he, she went to doctors and, of course, the town that we, that we were in didn't have, didn't have, uh, such a good doctor. There

was only one doctor in the town. So she went to quite a big city to get attention until, of course, they told her, he says, "Okay." And my father realized that coming to this, to this country, anything wrong, she, she would have to go through Ellis Island which is, she would have to go through another test. So he sent us tickets to go second class, and second class you didn't have to go into Ellis Island. See, first and second class, steerage did. Well, the lucky day came that the doctor in Lebow, that was the port city, okayed that she could go and we boarded, we boarded the ship and, at that time, it took twelve days to cross the ocean. The name of the ship was Kursk.

DANE: How do you spell that?

CHAIT: K-U-R-S-K. And, as a matter of fact, there's a city by that name in Russia, too. I don't know if they changed the name now.

DANE: Was that an American line, or a Russian line, or--

CHAIT: No, It was Russian/American Line. That, as a matter of fact, they had an office on the lower part of Broadway. At that time all the, the Cunard Line, they all had offices, they had a line there, too.

And, uh, we boarded the ship, and the ship was really beautiful. They had a beautiful cabin. Everything was fine. My younger brother, who was seven years younger than I am, unfortunately he just passed away about a year and a half and he was a doctor, and, uh, he got the measles while being on ship. So, of course, that put him in the hospital on the ship and my mother was there with him.

DANE: Was your mother terrified that--

CHAIT: That what?

DANE: That she'd get to the, oh, but you weren't going to go through Ellis Island, as you thought.

CHAIT: We, we didn't know anything about that. We didn't know anything about that.

DANE: So she wasn't worried that, that there'd be the possibility that if you were sick when you got New York--

CHAIT: We, we didn't know anything. Well, anyway, there was another little boy that also had the measles at the same time and about two or three days before the ship landed here in Brooklyn the little boy died.

And my mother, she had a heart of gold. Well, the moment that happened she starts crying. She didn't sleep and kept crying and, of course, the other mother was there, too. When the ship landed, so there was another dock they had to, to look you over, and lo and behold there she comes in with her eyes red and all that. Trachoma. So, of course, they took us by a small ship. more like a tugboat, to Ellis Island. We came to Ellis Island and, of course, the first thing she hears is this. You can't take, you can't take the children, bring him here, and have the woman go back, everybody goes back. So my father turns to the HIAS, which is the Hebrew Immigration--

DANE: Aid Society.

CHAIT: Aid Society, and he asks them for their advice. So they said, well, they'll appeal to Washington and see what they can do. And word came in from Washington that they would leave the children, come in, but with the understanding that we must go to school until we're sixteen, and my mother has to stay on Ellis Island until her eyes are cured. Well, it, it was a blessing. So we came in and my mother remained there. She stayed there, I think, anywhere from nine months to a year until, until her eyes were cured. We, of course, as children, had to take care of ourselves. So my older sister, she, she took care of the house. My younger sister, and we were just one or two years apart, my younger sister, she was a cook. I, I was the one that had to go to buy the groceries. So, of course, I used to

go to the butcher and it was understandable that I had to go to a kosher butcher. And, for your information, meat was eleven cents a pound. Unbelievable. And, of course, we had a four, four room apartment.

DANE: That sounds big.

CHAIT: Well, how can you live anywhere's else. Of course, it, it was, when I say apartment, it was a railroad flat and, of course, cold water. But we made home out of that.

DANE: Now, tell me, back up now, and go, ask you some questions about what you just said. When you got to Ellis Island, when you realized that you weren't going to be able to get up, was your father planning to meet you at the harbor when the boat came in?

CHAIT: Oh, he, he, he was, he was in Brooklyn to meet us, naturally. Surely. Surely, after all, you wouldn't think that he wouldn't come in. Sure.

DANE: But when you were taken to Ellis Island were you afraid? Did you know what was going on? Did your mother, was she aware that--

CHAIT: No. We didn't know what was going on. We didn't know what

was going on.

DANE: Then at what point did you realize she was going to have to stay on Ellis Island and you had to leave her?

CHAIT: When, when word came, when word came from Washington, my father used to visit us practically daily.

DANE: He could go out to the island?

CHAIT: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. There was a, there was a ferry boat that used to leave South Ferry to Ellis Island and, as a matter of fact, the name of the boat was Ellis Island. Sure. And, of course, then we knew about it. And that's the case where I think I didn't mention that he had to, he had to give a bond that we would go to school until sixteen. That was, that was exactly what came in from, uh, from Washington.

DANE: How long were you on the island waiting for the word on whether you'd be sent back or be allowed in?

CHAIT: I really don't remember the exact time, but we did spend there, I would say, maybe a month or six weeks.

DANE: Wow. Do you remember where you slept, and how--

CHAIT: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. You see, where, where the ferry boat would come in would be like in the center. There was a building on the right side, and a building on the left side. The building on the left was the hospital. The building on the right was where we stayed. Of course, there was also a case where we weren't the only ones. There were other people also that had some kind of trouble, and sometimes had to stay overnight because they came, they came late there, or whatever it might be. And, then again, you see, they, I think, we must have been anywhere's from ten to twelve people in a room. And the room was quite large. Big windows. And then again they didn't have beds all day long, but it had, it had these, uh, cots that, that they would have on poles, and a man would come in and just, with a chain, roll them up so they would go up to the ceiling. So we really had the room nice and clear. Of course, there were, uh, chairs and all that. And, of course, as far as that they had a, a shower room on the floor where we would go, to the shower room, any time, or as many times as we wanted. But all we could, all we could go was only, you see, the entire length of the hall with the rooms on both sides. That's the only place that we could, that we had the right to go. And, of course, there was a man sitting at one end, a man sitting at the other end, that we couldn't get out. And then, they would also take us, I don't quite remember exactly how often, on the roof. You know, so we could get some fresh air. They

were very nice, in Ellis Island, to us. The food was good. And then again they also had a kosher kitchen where they had a, you would call him a rabbi, but they don't have to be a rabbi. They call that (Hebrew), that looks after how to, how the food is prepared. But the food, I wouldn't complain.

As a matter of fact, before they would lock the door of our room, a man would come in with milk and, and crackers for the children.

DANE: Hmm. At nighttime.

CHAIT: At nighttime. It must have been, I would say, about ten o'clock. Night after night. So I really can't complain that, that we had it bad over there.

DANE: And those beds, there would be poles up on top and they would be rolled up?

CHAIT: No, no. See, there was a pole on this side and a pole on this side. And then again there was, they would slide down like cots and I think they were, I think two cots. In other words, there were four beds that would be, that would be rolled down there. And they were comfortable. They had bedding, they had, uh, quilts and the likes of that. I mean, I wouldn't complain about the, uh, the service they gave you there.

DANE: Was it clean?

CHAIT: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, they had men that would come in and, and mop up the floor and all that. Oh, yes. The windows were clean.

DANE: And about going outside as a young boy, didn't you itch to get outside and play. Could you--

CHAIT: But I couldn't. After all, I knew that, I knew where I was. And I was never a complaining boy. I was never a complaining husband either. (They laugh.)

DANE: You were up on the second level looking down into the Great Hall. Am I right?

CHAIT: On what floor?

DANE: Where you stayed. Didn't you look into the Great Hall?

CHAIT: No, I, I, we were facing, we were facing the river. All I could see was the river.

DANE: But the rooms, if I remember correctly, went around the

Great Hall. Didn't, were you on one floor?

CHAIT: No, you see, you're talking about the Great, the, the Great Hall, you mean, where they came in.

DANE: Uh-huh.

CHAIT: No. No. That was a way, away from where I stayed. That was away from where I stayed.

DANE: Were you aware of all the different people from all the different countries?

CHAIT: Oh, sure. As a matter of fact I, I never knew that there was such a thing as Poland and, then again, even Jewish people that come from Poland speak a little different then when we came.

DANE: Hmm. Interesting.

CHAIT: See, we, we were called Litvaks, see. When I first heard that I, I couldn't imagine what they were saying.

DANE: Did you make any friends when you were on Ellis Island?

CHAIT: Well, if there were some young, young boys my age, surely, we, I used to play with them or speak to them. But, of course, it was a case where there was nothing to do, and I didn't have any toys either, so--

DANE: When it was time to eat, would they take you down into a big dining room, or did they bring the food to you?

CHAIT: No, I think we used to go down to a dining room. I think we used to go down to a dining room. I wouldn't complain about the food, or anything like that.

DANE: And were you treated fairly well?

CHAIT: Oh, yes. I can't complain. Not, not that I would like to stay there, but for, uh, being an immigrant, I think we were treated very nicely

DANE: When you were on the island, were there any other things that you saw that were first impressions, the first time you ever saw, oh--

CHAIT: Well, I'll tell you, I, from the window, I couldn't see too much. Then there's another thing. The only tall

building at that time was the Singer Building. That was the tallest building that we had. We didn't have as, as, uh, we didn't have so many tall buildings as we have now. And, of course, while my mother was in Ellis Island for that, to cure her eyes, we used to go to visit her. We had the right to go to visit her. And, of course, we used to go as much as we can. During, during vacation, school time, we used to go there every day. And, of course--

DANE: This is the end of side one, tape one of Irving Chait, Interview Number 116. It's five o'clock.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DANE: This is tape one, side two of Irving Chait, Interview Number 116. It's 5:05.

CHAIT: Well, to answer that question--

DANE: Let me ask you it on tape. Uh, it occurs to me that as a young boy of ten years old, when it was time for you to come to Manhattan

and leave your mother on Ellis Island, for you didn't know how long, I would think that would be a hard thing to do.

CHAIT: Well, I'll tell you, I was blessed with a wonderful father.

He was highly learned in Hebrew. I'm sure that quite a number of rabbis that we have today didn't have the education that we had. And he was just wonderful to us. He absolutely, he worked fourteen hours a day in those days, seven days a week. But he, he would lose sleep, but he tried to be with us and encourage us that it's only for a short time and all that. And that helped along. He was really a wonderful man. People that knew him could understand it.

DANE: So he made you feel better about the fact that your mother was going to stay alone.

CHAIT: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We realized that any day, any day. We were looking day by day that this would be the day. And, of course, until the day came that she came over.

DANE: When would you go visit her, would the people on Ellis Island begin to know who you were and you would just find your own way into

the hospital to her room? How would you get there?

CHAIT: No, no, no, no. They, they had to have a special room for visitors and she would meet us there.

DANE: I see.

CHAIT: Of course, we weren't the only ones. There were other people also, that came to visit their mothers or their fathers.

DANE: So you would get off the ferry and then go to a specific office, or--

CHAIT: I knew, I knew, I think that if I go to Ellis Island today I could bring you to the room that I stayed in. Yeah.

DANE: And they would bring your mother from the hospital--

CHAIT: From the hospital. That's right. That's right.

DANE: And did she, indeed have trachoma?

CHAIT: Most likely, because there were so many doctors that said the same thing. So most likely it must have been. But she, she had good eyesight. Of course, when she got older, she started wearing glasses. But otherwise she, she was really a healthy woman. She lived to the age of eighty-four.

DANE: I guess she was. And they treated her successfully? The disease went away on Ellis Island, then.

CHAIT: Well, once she was admitted, it had to be cured. Otherwise they wouldn't let her off.

DANE: Hmm. Did you like Ellis Island when you would go visit it, or was it a horrible place to visit, or--

CHAIT: Well, I tell you something. I'm a realist. I always was.

It's the case where this thing happened and we had to make the best of it. I can't always say that I loved it, the place. Of course it was a nice place. I can't complain about it. Water all around, you know, and we had a nice room and all that, but, of course, there's nothing like being in your own home.

DANE: When you were on Ellis Island, did you see the Statue of Liberty ever?

CHAIT: We saw the Statue of Liberty when the ship came in. Yes. And, of course, it's the case where we, we learned about it, what the Statue of Liberty meant. See, we knew, we, we were really interested in these things and we spoke to people that were, that were in America, and we, we learned quite a few things.

DANE: Before you came?

CHAIT: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. There were quite a few people that, that came to America, that came from America back, and they, they stayed in Russia too, you know. My father just didn't like it.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. So when you pulled into New York harbor that first night, was it a thrill to see her, or--

CHAIT: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We, we were up on deck, we were up on deck just looking over the entire, the entire city of New York. Sure.

DANE: And, coming from a small village, I don't suppose there was electricity in your--

CHAIT: Uh, no. No. We used to use kerosene lamps, kerosene lamps.

DANE: And running water?

CHAIT: Running water, yes. But just cold water. It was a cold water flat.

DANE: Hmm. But in the old country did you, you didn't have toilets?

CHAIT: Outhouses.

DANE; Outhouses.

CHAIT: Outhouses, right.

DANE: So when, do you, this is kind of an embarrassing question, but did you use the toilet first on Ellis Island, or was that on--

CHAIT: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

DANE: Did you know what it was? So many people that I talked to can remember where they first used a running--

CHAIT: Well, you see, on the ship, we, we also had, uh, running water. As a matter of fact, when I pushed to flush it, there was an awful lot of noise and I thought, "Gee, I'm sinking the ship." (They laugh.)

DANE: Coming on the ship, again, from a small, a small boy from a small town, was it an impressive sight for you when you got to Lebow and you were ready to board?

CHAIT: Well, Lebow was quite a, quite a nice city, see. And, uh, of course, you see, I didn't see any buildings anywhere's in Russia that was maybe, uh, five, six stories. And, of course, when, as I said before, I, I saw the Singer Building, which I think is fifty-nine stories. So, of course, and I, I went to the top of the Singer Building too, you know, as a visitor. And then, of course, I was very much interested in things like on Saturday I used to walk from Brooklyn to, to the Aquarium. You know, the Aquarium was in South Ferry, you know that. And actually they used to call that Castle Garden. And of course, I used to go, I used to walk to, uh, to the

Brooklyn Museum. I was very much interested in these things. And I used to walk from Williamsburg all the way to Eastern Parkway and Flatbush Avenue where the, uh Brooklyn Museum is. And once I even went with some friends to the, uh, to the museum on Fifth Avenue and 84th Street.

DANE: Wow. Yeah, that's far.

CHAIT: I was very much interested in these things.

DANE: Did you speak English pretty quickly after you came here?

CHAIT: Well, as I told, as I told this (?), I happened to be very, very lucky. I was registered in the school and I started in what they call at that time 3-A. Used to be 3-A and 3-B. I started in 3-A. Of course, I didn't have any education in, in anything. And we were, I think, three or four boys, also, that came over from, from different parts of Europe and there was teacher that used to teach, that used to take care of kindergarten, used to spend from two-thirty to three o'clock with us. And teach, she used to teach English, and she was so wonderful, I absolutely, I can't remember her name, But she was so wonderful. I give

her all the credit for what she did for me. She was just wonderful. She was very, very pleasant, always with a smile, and somehow or other she just knew how to get around with people that, that don't speak English. And I'm very much against, like, right now, the Spanish people, they want, they want to have, teach the children, taught in Spanish. The biggest mistake they can make because when they go out in the business world you have to speak English. And I'm very much against it.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Did you go around with other Yiddish, Russian speaking children, or did you start meeting English speaking children?

CHAIT: No. The moment I came here my father said to me, "Look. Forget about everything. You have to learn the language. So you make a mistake, people will correct you." He says, "Some of them will laugh at you. Don't mind it. But you must learn the language." And he, and, of course, he happened to learn the language. As hard as he worked, long hours, he managed to go to night school and learn how to write. He had a beautiful handwriting. He had a beautiful handwriting.

DANE: Was his name, your name Irving Chait. Was it at all

changed or altered when you came into this country?

CHAIT: No. I'll tell you, the thing is this, you see. In Hebrew you pronounce the name "Hy-ate." There's no "CH" in the, so "CH" see. And, of course, "A-I-T" is Chait, but over there it would be "Shy-ate." So there was really no "C." As a matter of fact, there was somebody up here, I forgot exactly and, uh, he says to me, oh, yes, there was the nurse was up here and she says, "How are you Mr. Hyatt?" So I said to her, "Are you Jewish?" She says, "No." I says, "Then how do you come to say Hyatt?" So she tells me that as a woman working with her, her first name is Chaya, and she wants to be called by that name. I suppose she must be real Orthodox. "So when I saw your name," she says, "I said Hyatt."

DANE: Uh-huh. That's great. And Irving, what were you called?

CHAIT: Well, when I first, see, my, my Hebrew name is Ishrael, which means Israel. But when I started to work, I realized that I should change my name to Irving.

DANE: Hmm. How old were you when you made up that decision?

CHAIT: I believe I must have been about fifteen, about fifteen.

DANE: Did you feel like you were taking on a new identity?

CHAIT: No, but I realized that I should, I should have a different name than Israel.

DANE: And did you all stay in school until you were sixteen as--

CHAIT: Yes, yes. You see, I graduated elementary school before, and then I registered in a, in a business school, because I figured to know, to know, uh, bookkeeping and all that would come in handy because of what I do. So I, I registered. I even remember the name of the school. Eastern District Business School. (He laughs.)

DANE: Tell me. also, were you, it sounds like your father had a good, a good attitude for getting you into the American culture as quickly as possible. Did you ever feel like a greenhorn, like an outsider, like an immigrant?

CHAIT: We;;, I'll tell you, as a youngster, you know, when I came here, I was ten and a half, eleven years old, I'd always find boys around the neighborhood, and even Jewish boys call you greenhorn. But I realized that it's only a passing thing. And, of course, some of the, I told them, I said, "Aren't you ashamed?" I said, "Your own kind," I says, "to make you

feel so bad?" And I really, I really got away from all that. But, off course, there were some boys that called me greenhorn, but I realized it would only be-- See, then there's another thing. When my mother came back from, came off Ellis Island, we moved two blocks away. By that time my language was, was good. And, of course, that, all this was left behind.

DANE: Hmm. Hmm. Did she have an easy adjustment, your mother, coming? Because, really, you'd all been here a year before she got even to New York. Did she like it here? She really didn't want to leave in the first place.

CHAIT: Well, yes. Well, listen, once she was here she realized that this was going to be her home. After all, you know, she was a smart woman. She realized she'll never go back to Russia. So, of course, she, she made this her home.

DANE: After you finished with school, what was the trade that you took up? How did you get work?

CHAIT: Well, (he laughs) there was a friend of my father's that he happened to, my father asked him, he was in business, some kind of business. So, uh, he says, "What do you think," he says, "you should look for?" So he says

that on Eldridge Street between Delancey and Hester Street, at that time, all the businesses on the street were stocking goods. He says, "Let him go down there," he says, "and try to get a job." Well, sure enough, I got up one morning looking for a job on Eldridge Street. I came to Eldridge and Broome Street, there was a corner store, and they had piece goods, menswear. Not cotton goods, but woolens, and there was a sign, "Boy Wanted." So I thought I'd be funny. I took off the sign, I walked in, I says, "Here I am." The man looked at me and smiled. He says, "All right, you're hired." And I, I got eleven dollars a week, which was considered, in those days, a pretty good salary. There were some men that working for that salary. Well, I worked there a few months.

DANE: Explain piece work. What would you do?

CHAIT: Pieces? To make suits out of them. You know, the piece goods, that you made for men's suits. Just for menswear.

DANE: What would your actual job be? Would you cut things out, or--

CHAIT: No. It was the case, at that time, business happened to be pretty good and it's the case where I had to, people came in to buy. Then again, you see, people also used to come in to buy goods for a suit and then take it to a tailor. So, of course, I, I had to show him the goods, to pick out whatever they wanted and, at that time, I think they used to take about three and a half dollars, three and half yards for a suit. So I would have to measure, I had to learn how to measure it, and then cut it off and pack it up and get the money and give it, and give it to the cashier that we had, sure. So when I worked there, I don't know, very short time, just. So then there was a man that had a store in Brooklyn that used to come in here to buy goods from him. So one day he says to me, "I'd like to have your address." So I gave him my address, and one Saturday night there's a knock on the door. We didn't have any bells then. All they had to do was knock on the door. We'd say, "Come in." Today, today Lord knows who would come in. So he says, "How would you like to work for me?" I says, "What have you got to offer?" He says, "I'll tell you what I'd like you to do. I'd like you to take out--." And he really had beautiful stuff. He had very good taste in buying goods. He said, "I'd like you to go out to sell

to tailors." And I was quite big for my age. So, uh, I says, "On what basis?" He said, I'll give you fifteen dollars a week and two percent commission." Just then a salesman came in that he represented. Tetner Woolens, which was considered a very big firm.

DANE: Tetman?

CHAIT: Tetner. Yes. So he tells them what proposition he's given to me. And I never, I never knew this man. He says, "Young man," he says, "take it." "Take it," he says. "It's a wonderful proposition for you." So I said, "Well, I'll go home and speak, speak to my people." I spoke to my father and mother and they said, "Look. You have no children to support. Take a chance." Well, I worked for him, I think, about two years.

DANE: How old were you when you first got it, about?

CHAIT: Uh, I think I was just about sixteen. I was just about sixteen then. Well, I worked for him about two, two and a half years, when it seems there was a break in the market in this respect. I had to get goods eight dollars and seventy-five cents a yard. And the market broke so

badly that some people that never even went out to sell to tailors, because business was so good, that they went out to sell to tailors, the same goods, for three dollars and seventy-five cents a yard. And I came into, into a tailor, and he told me, he said, "You're crazy," he says. I says, "Why?" He says, "So and so was in, three dollars and seventy-five cents. So of course I, I battled it for about a week and I realized I can't go on. So I came back to, to my boss and I told him that. I says, "I can't sell any goods." "I'll tell you what I'm going to do," he says. "I cannot, I don't want to sell them for three dollars and seventy-five cents because I'd have to take a loss. I can get rid of my stock selling retail." See. So I says, well, I says, "Then I have no, no--." "Wait a minute," he says. "If you want to work for me in the store, I'll pay you twenty-five dollars a week." But, of course, when I was selling on the outside to tailors I was making fifty and better. So he says, "Well," he says, "that's the best I can do." So while I was working for him, it happened to be once I had to go in to see a, a very big jobber on Fourth Avenue, that's, the entire Fourth Avenue, from 23rd to 14th Street was just, was just these woolens jobbers.

DANE: And would you go to each one of these shops, or--

CHAIT: No, no.

DANE: How would you get clients? How would you know where to go?

CHAIT: You mean, in order, in order to sell to tailors?

DANE: Uh-huh.

CHAIT: I just walked through the streets. I walked through the streets. At that time there was tailors on every street. But I'm saying tailors, they weren't tailors for cleaning and pressing. They had only piece goods. If you wanted to have a suit for yourself you came in, selected a suit. Of course, you have three or four men working in back, by hand, making suits.

DANE: And you would bring in the wool? You would show them samples of wool?

CHAIT: That's right. I had samples. I walked, I walked with little packets like this with samples. They would select whatever they wanted.

DANE: Did you have regular clients that you would always go to, or--

CHAIT: Well, once, once I sold a man, the first time, he didn't

have any clients at all. I just went out blind. But, you see, once I sold a man once, naturally he engaged in business, so I did, he needed more goods. Somehow or other I was very well liked by people.

DANE: So you would just go, what kind of area would you cover?

CHAIT: Anywhere's I wanted to go. The city was mine. At that time Harlem, Harlem had high class people living there. And, of course, there was tailors. I used to walk through the streets. When I saw a tailor I used to come in, give him my card, and show him what I had. Well, anyway, when, when he, when he didn't, when he, he didn't want to sell any more because, so, during the time I worked for him I once had to go to, to this jobber on Fourth Avenue and, uh, the man said, "Gee," he says, "George speaks very highly of you." I says, "Thank you." He says, "How would you like to work for me?" And, of course, when I, when I couldn't work for him any more I came in, I said, "Can you use me now?" And he put me on. And, of course, at first I didn't go out selling, but I had quite a big shop because they had people coming in from all over the country buying piece goods. And, of course, they needed a man to sell. Well, I think, at first, when I started to work there I didn't do any selling. But then again, they moved, they built their own building on the corner of Fourth Avenue and 21st Street, which is opposite, is it Old Calvary Church? They put up a ten story building, and they took the entire, the entire store. If you ever

pass by you can see it, they had a basement and a sub-basement where they would do the shipping and stock.

DANE: So you watched this whole textile area just sort of boom and grow and expand?

CHAIT: Oh, sure. Oh, sure, I did. But after, after a while, you see, what happened, you know, things change. At one time, if you went on Fifth Avenue, at that time it was Broadway, from Bleeker Street to 14th Street, you could walk into any building in every floor. All you had was manufacturer of clothing. Some of them were bigger, some of them were smaller, but that's all you had. And, naturally, it's these jobbers who used to sell them the goods. And, and it's a case where people came, used to come in from Chicago, from Los Angeles, from San Francisco, St. Louis, and, of course, somebody had to wait on them. And the first chance they had they put me on the floor selling.

DANE: You sound like you liked sales. Is that it?

CHAIT: Oh, yes. I always did like selling. I always did like selling.

DANE: I'm going to, we're almost near the end of the tape. But I

just wanted to ask two quick questions. One has to do with citizenship. Did you become an American citizen?

CHAIT: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

DANE: How did you do that? Did you have to take a test, or, as a--

CHAIT: No. No, I just applied for it. And, of course, I came to, in Long Island, I came to the court there and I got my citizenship. Surely.

DANE: How old were you then?

CHAIT: Offhand I don't know.

DANE: A young man or--

CHAIT: Oh, yes. I was young, but I am a citizen. There's no doubt about that. My father also was a citizen. But, you see, when my father became a citizen I was already past the age.

DANE: Right. Looking back on your father's decision to have you

pack up because there wasn't a future for you in your small town in Russia, and come to America, do you think that was a good decision?

CHAIT: Well, as it turned out, I wouldn't be here today. Hitler would have gotten me.

DANE: Okay.

CHAIT: Of course, as a, as a child, when you say that you can go to America it sounds very exciting. At that time young men used to, used to, uh, at the age of eighteen or so they would leave Russia and come to this country. And, of course, this wasn't so easy, because you couldn't get out of Russia. So they had to absolutely sneak away because if they'd be caught they'd be put in the army.

DANE; Hmm. Did you have any image about what America would be like when you were a little boy?

CHAIT: Well, I, I really can't say that I had it. My father told me quite a few things when he came back. But to say that I had an image of it, I didn't. But, of course, you see, uh, we, as boys, used to speak about America. Every, even young boys used to speak that someday they wanted to be in America. They don't want to stay in Russia.

DANE: I guess that's it. This is the end of tape one, side two,  
Irving Chait, Interview Number 116. It's 5:28.