

KECK-119

BEATRICE (BASIA) NORMAN  
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RUSSIA, 1923  
AGE 5  
PASSAGE ON "THE LAPLAND"

RICHARD: This is Jill Richard, and I'm speaking with Beatrice Norman on Tuesday, January 21, 1986. We are beginning this interview at 1:45. We are about to interview Mrs. Norman about her immigration experience from Russia in 1923. She was five years old. This is side one of tape one of Interview Number 119. Mrs. Norman, before we talk about your immigration experience, let's start with some background. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

NORMAN: I was born in a. uh, very small village, a hamlet, I would say, in Russia.

RICHARD: Can you remember the name of the village?

NORMAN: No, I really don't recall. It was a very difficult name. I really have no recollection of it. In fact, we can't even find it on the map. (They laugh.)

RICHARD: Okay. Tell me a little bit about the town, the village, that you lived in?

NORMAN: About the village? Ooh, I just know that it was very tiny and, uh, pogroms were going on constantly.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. Was your family involved in any of these pogroms? Was this, did this have anything to do with your family directly?

NORMAN: Oh, yes. Of course. In fact, our village was burned to a crisp at one point.

RICHARD: The whole village?

NORMAN: That's right. The whole village. One, uh, home was saved. All the villagers, they put their efforts together and they saved that one home.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. The one home.

NORMAN: And my grandfather had his back burned in that fire and, uh, because, he helped, he was the leader in helping to save this home. They allowed us to stay in, in the cellar for a couple of weeks, and then we had to move on.

RICHARD: What happened to the rest of the village at that time? Did they have to move also?

NORMAN: Everyone had to relocate. Of course.

RICHARD: Did they rebuild in the same area, or did they--

NORMAN: They may have. Of course, um, transportation was, uh, a cart, like you saw in movies of the, uh, I can't recall the name of it. It was on the, uh, stage show, too. Do you know which one I mean? Anyway, on a small cart, we had to dump our few meager belongings, and the younger kids, we moved on.

RICHARD: Was this a horse drawn cart, or were you-- Was it a horse drawn cart?

NORMAN: No. It was not a horse drawn cart. It was a-- (She laughs.)

RICHARD: And where did you go from that village?

NORMAN: From there we went to, we made another stopover. I can't tell you the name of the town, of course. And, uh, we landed in a, a building that had several rooms, and there were several families there already. Each family occupied one room and we were allotted the kitchen. And I had a sister who was older than I was. She had the, contracted, uh, diphtheria. Of course, at that time we didn't know what it was. We later learned what it was. And with diphtheria you had a severe, uh, temperature. And being in the kitchen, of course, people were cooking. It was very hot. And my oldest brother, my grandfather, he was still alive, they were carrying her back and forth from one room to another to afford her a little air. She died in my brother's arms. Yeah.

RICHARD: Can you tell me what time frame this was? When it was that you left your original village?

NORMAN: We left, uh, well, i took us about six months to get to America because we stayed four months, three or four months on the island. And a month in Antwerp. So it was about, uh, '22.

RICHARD: 1922.

NORMAN: The mid '22.

RICHARD: And can you tell me a little bit about your family? You mentioned your sister.

NORMAN: My family, uh, my, uh, the, uh, my brothers and sisters?

Uh-huh. Well, as I said, my brother who was fifteen, and the, uh, Russians were so, had already come in, and my brother was working for them in a clinic and at night he worked in an orchard for a wealthy family. He was like the, uh, guard, in the orchard. And he used to bring home fruit that used to drop from the trees, he brought home. And at that time there was really starvation and deprivation. And the two older brothers used to steal into the gardens of the wealthier people to rob roots of all kinds. And that's what we ate, potatoes and other roots.

RICHARD: Uh-huh, this was the main stay of your diet.

NORMAN: This was the mainstay, yes, yes. And of course we lived in the hovel where there was no water or anything to, to really, no sanitation of any kind. That's what happened to us, you see. That's why we were detained.

RICHARD: Uh, you mentioned your grandfather, was he with you at this time, was he traveling with you?

NORMAN: At this time, before we sailed, my grandfather and grandmother. Before all this happened, my grandfather was one of the most affluent members in that village. And of course, when everything was burned down to a crisp, there was nothing. But my grandfather and grandmother were still with us at the time. And one of the, uh, hovels that we had stopped over on the way, I don't know what, the way to where, I can't tell you. Just going, looking for a place to relocate. And, uh, there was still some fighting going on and shooting and my grandmother was standing near a cow in the shed and a bullet just missed her and hit the cow.

RICHARD: Oh my goodness!

NORMAN: It must have been the tail end of the, uh, some one pogrom of it, pogrom or another. Of course, that's what happened.

RICHARD: Your grandfather and grandmother stayed with you until--

NORMAN: Until we sailed, until we left our town and went to, uh, Warsaw.

RICHARD: To Warsaw.

NORMAN: And my grandfather was very, very, he became very ill at the thought that we were leaving. They thought that my father and his brother who both were in America. They thought that they would send money for them to immigrate too, but they didn't. It was very sad. And they remained there.

RICHARD: They only sent money for their children.

NORMAN: After one week, when we were leaving, my grandfather took  
to his bed and he turned his head to the wall, and he wouldn't turn  
around to say goodbye to us. And we were in Warsaw one week, and  
word came that grandpa died, and my oldest brother had to go back.

RICHARD: Oh. And your grandmother was still alive?

NORMAN: She remained.

RICHARD: Going back a little. When was it that you decided to come to  
America? Was this before you left your village or was this something that happened as a  
result of the evacuation?

NORMAN: It was before. It was before. I know that it was before  
because there was just talk of it. My father had already been here.  
Naturally, he came here to seek his fortune, and to bring his  
family over, away from all that, uh, terror. And, uh, after my father left, my mother  
found that she was pregnant again. And, of course, it wouldn't do in the grand scheme of  
things, would be spoiled. She was so ashamed to tell anyone and she tried to abort  
herself. And, uh, part of the placenta had not been delivered and she was poisoned. So--

RICHARD: That's how you lost your mother?

NORMAN: So she was left, yeah, no, I never even knew her.

RICHARD: I see.

NORMAN: Yeah.

RICHARD: Uh-huh.

NORMAN: And I never knew my father either.

RICHARD: You never got to know your father?

NORMAN: No. He left and, uh, the thought of going to America was so, in my mind, naturally people talk and they say in America there are no wars, there's no pogroms. So the only thing that was on my mind is no pogroms in America. (She laughs.) Not, "I'm going to see my father." That was the main thing.

RICHARD: Your feelings about leaving were very positive?

NORMAN: Oh yes, very positive.

RICHARD: And the things. what were the things that you had heard about America? That it was wonderful place--

NORMAN: Oh, because that it was a wonderful country naturally, and that there was peace and freedom for all and no pogroms, period. (She laughs.)

RICHARD: Were there other people from your village that were also going to America?

NORMAN: I think so, because when we were already on the island and the very same day that we were checking out an my father had come to call for us. I saw a little

girl who had been a friend of mine. She was just coming in as we were leaving. (She laughs.) Yeah, there were other people, of course. There were so many people I'll tell you. When we stopped off in Warsaw we had to wait there for the, uh, the financial arrangements, the visas, etc. There was such an influx at that time the quota was pretty good for the, uh, immigrants. And there was, the hotel was filled up so, in the, in the corridors they made sleeping quarters. One for men and one for women. That's how crowded it was. So there were many people migrating at that time.

RICHARD: Were these people mostly from Russia or--

NORMAN: Russia and Poland. I would say, both.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. Your village was quite near Poland. Did this mean that you were speaking Polish at that time or were you speaking Russian or Yiddish?

NORMAN: It was Russian because my brother knew, remembered a little Russian. I just knew a few words. But he remembered Russian so it was still Russia at the time. Yeah. Well even if it had turned Polish the people would still speak their language, their Russian language.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. But I think on borders, y, al border lines people sometimes will speak one or the other or both languages.

NORMAN: Yes, of course. Well, in the, in the European countries, most people speak more than one language because of the proximity of the countries. Not like here. We're isolated. We're one country. And English is our sole language. But any foreigner that I knew, all spoke several languages. Especially if they were on the border line to other countries. Three, four, and five languages.

It's nothing new to them. (She laughs.)

RICHARD: Can you remember any of the preparations involved for leaving or was this completely up to your brother?

NORMAN: Oh, could I tell you a little bit something before that?

RICHARD: Sure.

NORMAN: Uh. In one of the villages, during a pogrom that was about to take place. Naturally the word spread. And we had our windows covered with rags. And I remember very surreptitiously we crept over to the window and pulled the curtain aside to see. And we could see them all laying spread out on the ground and they would, uh, rape, and pilfer, and kill, but fortunately I was so little they said, "Who needs her, we have grown up women." (She laughs.)

RICHARD: But you remembered seeing the violence.

NORMAN: I remember that part looking out the window and the thought well, the pogrom was the main theme you see.

RICHARD: Did you have any political awareness at this time? Were you aware of who was involved in these pogroms?

NORMAN: Yes, simply that, uh, when we, whether the ally or the Soviets were in, it was just one thing that I was aware of. And my brother, as I said, he was working for the Soviets, and, uh, when they were getting ready to retreat, they wanted to take him along. Because he was very precocious and they said he would make a good doctor. He

worked in a clinic and they wanted to train him. So he came rushing hell bent for election, home, and he started packing his things and he's going. And we said, "Where are you going?" And he told us he was leaving us. Naturally, suffice to say we all carried on. And then he just looked at us and he said, "Oh, I'm not gonna go, you're all too little." (She laughs.)

RICHARD: How did he manage to escape being drafted into the army?

NORMAN: Oh, he was only fifteen.

RICHARD: His age?

NORMAN: Yeah. His age of course. But of course the Soviets, they couldn't force him to go along. He just didn't, they were ready to retreat and he remained home, he didn't go. Everybody was pleading with him, neighbors and all. And my grandparents were old already at that time. He said, "I can't leave you with the two old folks." So he remained. (She laughs.)

RICHARD: Now when you left your grandparents in, in Warsaw, were you there waiting for money to arrive from America?

NORMAN: We were waiting for money, for arrangements of the money and the, uh, the visa and passport. Uh-huh.

RICHARD: And what happened right before you boarded the boat? Did you have to have an exam of sorts?

NORMAN: In, uh, not in Poland. Poland was merely the arrangement. From Poland we went to, uh, Antwerp. There, we were, had strenuous physical exams. And that's

when they, they took our hair off by the, uh, process of electrolysis.

RICHARD: Where exactly was this done? Was this in a hospital or in a processing--

NORMAN: It was in a clinic. And we had to go there three times a week and, oh, I was completely totaled, so were my two other brothers. Because we had to lie very, very quiet. And you know in those days people knew very little about psychology and children and they scared the life out of us. They said to us if you make one wrong move, it would be fatal. So we just lay there and we were afraid to breathe. And this happened three times a week for several number of weeks.

RICHARD: Were you aware of what exactly this process was when you were doing this?

NORMAN: At that time we didn't know. We knew that they were removing our hair. But of course we didn't know anything about electrolysis or such.

RICHARD: Did you know why they were doing it?

NORMAN: Well my oldest brother must have known. They must have told him. But the little ones weren't concerned with that.

RICHARD: In retrospect do you know why? Was this because of lice?

NORMAN: Oh, yes because of, no, they removed our hair because we had the, uh, pediculi in our hair. (She laughs.) As I said, my oldest brother he was so young

himself and of course he knew well enough to take care of himself. But the burden fell on him of taking care of us. And I guess he neglected it. It was obvious. So the three of us, the three younger ones had to undergo that treatment.

RICHARD: Were you aware of any other people being subjected to the same treatment?

NORMAN: Having the same process? Uh, I don't recall exactly. But while we were on the island, we saw other children wrapped, their heads were wrapped the same way. Yeah.

RICHARD: So once this electrolysis process was completed, you were allowed to board the boats?

NORMAN: Yes. We sailed on the Lapland. Was the name of the boat.

RICHARD: Lapland. Can you tell me a little bit about the boat?

NORMAN: Well, I had heard other people mention, oh, they didn't get enough to eat, they, they were, they were, they had seasickness, and all that. But we didn't have anything of that. As I said, my main thought was getting to America, and you know, the peace, and, uh, uh, freedom here. But, uh, we encountered, uh, a severe storm at one point where the water was flying over one side to the other. (She laughs.) But we weren't seasick.

RICHARD: You managed to escape the seasickness?

NORMAN: No, and we were in the, of course, third class in steerage. That was one of the reasons why we had to stop off at the, uh, island.

RICHARD: What was steerage like?

NORMAN: Steerage? Oh, my God, everybody was huddled together.  
It was terrible.

RICHARD: Did you have your belongings with you at that time?

NORMAN: Very meager belongings. Very meager.

RICHARD: What sort of things did you bring?

NORMAN: Yeah. Pardon me?

RICHARD: What sort of things did you bring?

NORMAN: Well, merely, uh, few rags of clothing, such as they were. And, uh, maybe a pair of shoes. Nothing more. We were glad, if we ever got a piece of bread. I remember, we used to say that--

RICHARD: Was this on the boat?

NORMAN: No, this was, uh, sorry, I'm regressing a little bit. This was, uh, when we were still there. Yeah, but on the boat, of course, we had some food, naturally.

RICHARD: Where did they feed you?

NORMAN: Where? In, uh, on long, uh tables.

RICHARD: In a dining room?

NORMAN: Family style, yeah.

RICHARD: Were you separated from the rest of the passengers? The first and second class.

NORMAN: Oh yes, of course. The steerage was forbidden territory to the upper class. (She laughs.)

RICHARD: Sure. And what did you do to pass the time on the boat? Did you play?

NORMAN: Of course. We played, and, uh, my brothers. Naturally I had two younger brothers. Other children were there.

RICHARD: So you kept each other company?

NORMAN: Yeah. And also in, uh, when we were in Antwerp. I was outdoors, and I used to play, and even began to learn a few words of the Belgium language. (She laughs.)

RICHARD: That's great. How long did the voyage take?

NORMAN: How long? It took a couple of weeks.

RICHARD: Can you remember what it was like when you entered the New York harbor?

NORMAN: Oh my goodness, the excitement. People, (she laughs) didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Excitement was--

RICHARD: Was everyone out on the deck?

NORMAN: Everyone was on the deck. And, of course, they didn't know what the lady with her arm up was. But they knew it was land.

RICHARD: This was something you hadn't heard about, the Statue of Liberty?

NORMAN: We hadn't, no, we had not.

RICHARD: Do you remember seeing her?

NORMAN: Pardon me?

RICHARD? Do you remember seeing the statue?

NORMAN: Seeing it, of course, from the distance. Sure. It was such elation, such joy, my God. And more so for the older people, you know. Children are more, uh, amused with other things. But the older people, naturally, they're the ones who cried and carried on. Not so much the little ones.

RICHARD: So it was generally a feeling of great excitement.

NORMAN: Yeah. It was great excitement.

RICHARD: After the boat docked, what was the procedure then?

NORMAN: After the boat docked on a, uh, like a ferry. We were ferried into the, uh, island. And the first thing that hit me as we walked in to this tremendous, it was a cavernous room. Later on when I went to visit, not long ago, it didn't seem so immense. But, but at that time, oh, you know, little me and the cavernous room. Our footsteps reverberated. We must have been the first few to enter. You could hear the footsteps all over the building. And of course--

RICHARD: Sounds like this was in the early morning. Was it? Do you remember what time?

NORMAN: It was early, yeah. And, uh, then of course it became very crowded. All the, uh, passengers had gotten off. And then the, uh, men in white started to come out. And the, uh, physical examination was very stringent. And it was done in assembly fashion. Each, uh, physician examined a different part of the, uh, body, yes. The eyes, the nose, the ears, every part. Each one specialized. And then, of course, the, uh, psychological testing.

RICHARD: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

NORMAN: The psychological testing. Well, again I say, with the little ones, they just asked simple questions. Your name, and, your brothers name, and things like that. Because they knew, naturally, that we don't know too much more. And, uh, there were several doors, that I noticed, they kept sending people to one door, the other and the other. And I said, "Oh, I wonder what door we're going to go through?" (They laugh.) Like that story with the, uh, remember that story with the, uh, one door had the, was the good door, and one door was the, uh, fatal door. One had the lion and was a toss up where they were going to go.

RICHARD: Were you afraid at this time?

NORMAN: I was afraid at that time. Especially when I saw that they had already sent my brother through one door. The oldest one. And I said, "I wonder if we're gonna go to the same door?" It was terrible. So that was the first separation. That wasn't too bad, because my two other brothers were still with me. And before long, we got to a place and then there was a second devastating separation. My two brothers went together, and I was shipped off alone. Into this cottage.

RICHARD: Where was the cottage?

NORMAN: It was on the island.

RICHARD: Do you remember what part of the island it was?

NORMAN: What part, uh, well the island has a little body of water separating two parts of it. And we were on the part not near the statue. We were on the other side. We were on the part, where, the, where, where, we, uh, port of entrance, you know. The other side had the large buildings where they stayed after they decided what to do with the immigrants. And the two cottages, uh, they were, we were on the upper floor. The floor below us they had, uh, men who were mentally retarded. And they were there waiting to be deported. And on the other, they were more than retarded, really, they were mental. And a couple of steps away was another cottage, and they had the females there. The same category.

RICHARD: Were these people that had come from America or were they people that--

NORMAN: They were coming to America. They were immigrants, but when they got here, after being examined, psychologically and psychiatrically they saw that they couldn't let them enter and they kept them there. Uh, and we were upstairs above these men. And I was always very nosey. There was big crack in the floor on the porch, outside. So I lied down and was looking down, and one of the inmates had seen me, and he started to climb up. (She coughs.) On the, uh, the rail. Of course, someone came and put a, uh, straight jacket on him. And that was stopped. And we were not allowed out doors. But I noticed that the, across that little body of water, I used to see people and children running around and playing. (She cough.) Excuse me. And this will show the, how the, uh, the culture on the island was such, I had said to one of the, uh, caretakers, "Well, how come on the other side they can go outdoors and we can't?" Of course the, the reason why we couldn't was obvious. They didn't want us to, to see these people, you know. The men and the women. And so this, uh, custodian said to me, "Well you will be glad that your here because those people are waiting to be deported." On the other side, you know.

RICHARD: Oh, the men and the women and the children on the other side.

NORMAN: Yeah, the ones that were on the other side of the water. They were waiting to be deported.

RICHARD: Was this, uh, cottage that you were in a type of hospital?

NORMAN: The cottage? No, it was just a sort of, a stepping stone to go either here or there. Until they made up their mind what they were going to do with the immigrants.

RICHARD: How long did you stay at this place?

NORMAN: On, on this little cottage, uh, not long, a couple of weeks. And, uh, but also when I first came into the, uh, into the cottage, all these inmates there, they taunted me with, "Oh your gonna sleep un that bed. That lady died last night, the one you're gonna sleep in." (She laughs.)

RICHARD: Were you alone at this time?

NORMAN: I was alone already. My brothers were elsewhere. I didn't even know where they were.

RICHARD: How did you understand these people? Were they speaking your language?

NORMAN: They must have been speaking in Yiddish or in Russian which at that time I knew a little. Yeah.

RICHARD: And did you ha, say that you knew where your brothers were at this time?

NORMAN: I didn't know where they were. I didn't know anything about it. They had a building there, Castle Garden. You must have heard of Castle Garden. That was the name of the building. They kept these, uh, people who, uh, came, immigrated, and they were waiting for part of their family to be released. And those that were okay, ready to be released, they waited. They, they had a separate, uh, separate area where they stayed.

RICHARD: And they were waiting for people that were detained?

NORMAN: And my brother, my oldest brother who had no problem with

his hair. He stayed there. And my other two brothers they stayed in the men's division as I did with the females. You see? And after this lady had said to me that those people on the other side were waiting to be deported. A couple of days later, a director comes, and she says, "Attention, the following names are going to be sent over to the other side." (She laughs.) To that building down there. She pointed.

RICHARD: Was this the building where the people were being sent back?

NORMAN: That's what she had said. And when she read the names, I was one of the first as in the poem. My name led all the rest. And when I heard that, well, needless to say what went on. But before we were sent over there I cried and cried the whole week. I couldn't see my brothers to relate to them, to share with them the terror that struck at my heart. Finally we were sent over there. Once we were there, my oldest brother was allowed to come to visit. See, it was the cottage that we were in, and the fact that these people, that I told you, those mental people were there, that they didn't allow any visitors of any kind. And we were only, there was only a temporary stay over for us. But once we were on the other side my aunt came to visit my father. But until they came I carried on. But my brother assured me that that's not true. That they had only told me that, you know, to slough off answering why they were there and we were here.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. When did your father and aunt come to visit you?  
How long had you been on Ellis Island?

NORMAN: Well, they came to visit at regular visiting time, and my grandmother came to visit, too.

RICHARD: Your other grandmother?

NORMAN: This was another, my maternal grandmother. She was here.  
And she used to come to visit very, very regularly, on the ferry, I remember. And she used to tell me, after, of course, we became Americanized, and we knew what was going on, she said, "On the ferry," she said, "there were these men going about questioning the name of the relative that were on the island." And she said, "I never told them because then would blackmail you. They wanted money to keep you from being deported." That was her.

RICHARD: She was smart.

NORMAN: She used to tell me that. Yeah. She was very, very clever lady.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. Now, the reason for your detention was your hair problem?

NORMAN: No. When we got over to the other side then, they, uh, strapped our heads like a skull cap from the ears up, and all around, with a very wide adhesive tape. That had to stay on for a certain period. And when they removed it, they tested the hair. I think that was to, uh, sort of expedite the growth of the hair. That, uh, tape. Then they would test the hair and it had to prove negative. And this procedure went on three different times. And we were there about three months on the island. So it took long. And you could imagine the feeling. Not only being there, and even when I was sent over to

the other side of the water. I was there without my brothers also. Of course, the oldest brother came to visit, but the ones that were detained, they didn't come. They still stayed where they were, so, I was still all alone. And being alone, and the new land, and here I have to worry will I be neg, negative, positive, that much I knew, you know. It was really terrible, horrendous experience.

RICHARD: You had a lot to think about at five years old.

NORMAN: It was terrible. Then, of course, we were facing, uh, our building was next to the, uh statue. And then I learned that the statue was. (She laughs.)

RICHARD: Did you learn any other things there? Did they allow you to--

NORMAN: And while I was there, I learned, I used to yell across the body of water to my brothers. I could now count to ten. (She laughs.) So excited. (She laughs.)

RICHARD: Were you learning a little bit of English?

NORMAN: Yes, of course.

RICHARD: Were there other children detained in your area?

NORMAN: Oh yes, there were other children and we were outdoors, we were playing. And there you could buy candy, something new, you know, to chew on. (She laughs.)

RICHARD: Were you able to buy things? You had some money.

NORMAN: Yeah, well, when they came to visit, of course, they brought things.

RICHARD: How did you feel when you saw your father?

NORMAN: When I saw my father. I really can't say.

RICHARD: This is the end of side one of tape one of Interview Number 119 with Beatrice Norman.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

RICHARD: This is the beginning of side two of tape one of Interview Number 119 with Beatrice Norman. You were telling us about your father and the first time you saw him after many years.

NORMAN: Well you see, naturally, being brought up by my father's parents, we looked upon them as parents. And it never even entered that my father, as I said, the main thought was coming to a place where there would be freedom. But it never dawned on me to be anxious about my father. That's the truth. And my father was very hurt when we came here. I couldn't call him father and he used to say, "Can't you call me father or papa or something?" It was very strange, you know, we hadn't known him.

RICHARD: He was a stranger to you.

NORMAN: Yeah.

RICHARD: Was he the person that brought you up when you came to this country?

NORMAN: Oh, yes, of course. He was the one.

RICHARD: So after you were detained at Ellis Island, and you were allowed to leave, where did you go first?

NORMAN: Well my father took us home. He had remarried in the interim. He had a little apartment, and we went there.

RICHARD: Was this in New York City?

NORMAN: Yeah. In Brooklyn. But that, uh, didn't last too long because he had married a woman who had been a spinster. She had never been married and, of course, didn't know what it was to raise children. And here we came, four of us, you know.

RICHARD: An instant family.

NORMAN: Yeah. And it wa too much for her. She had a nervous breakdown. And my father called her brother who was a doctor. And he took her to Kings County. And my father used to go and visit her. And, uh, he was grant and annulment because she had been mentally ill before she married my father and she had not disclosed the fact to him. And that was grounds for an annulment. So we were-- (She laughs.) We had to separate again, because my father couldn't take care of us. He was busy working. So the two older brothers lived with him and one little one went to another uncle. I went to the Bronx to an aunt. We were separated. But nevertheless it was different, very different from the separation before that.

RICHARD: You knew where everyone was and that they were well.

NORMAN: Yeah. Yeah. I naturally, was introduced to my aunt and family, there were cousins. And for a long time, I never knew what mother, as I said before, mother or father was, and so when I lived with my maternal grandmother, I saw my cousins had mother, and they, mothers, and they called them mother, and I said, "What's this mother business?" (She laughs.) So every night I used to cry and slept near my grandmother's bed. And she said, "What are you crying about?" I said, "How come I don't ever have a mother?" (She laughs.)

RICHARD: Was she able to explain to you a little bit?

NORMAN: Yeah, of course.

RICHARD: So you spent your childhood in the Bronx?

NORMAN: Uh, for a little while, I lived with the maternal grandmother. And then one of my brothers said, "Well, I think, uh, that my sister should live with the youngest members of the family, because what can she possibly gain or learn from an old grandmother, you know?" So I went to live with some aunts and cousins. And then we, uh, later on, he, my brother wanted me to come and live with my father in Brooklyn. And, uh, he had married. He was still a young man himself. So he remarried, and uh, my step-mother, she promised that I could live with them. And my other brothers would be allowed to come weekly, like for dinner or something. But as soon as they were married, forget it. Nothing like that ever happened. Even, I did stay with them. And, uh, there was such mistreatment that I had to run away from them and go to my aunt in the Bronx. I lived there most of my time. Until I met my husband, married at sixteen and a half. Well, you know, not having a home, and his mother had just died a short time ago. And he was sort of floundering around too. He was twenty and I was sixteen and a half. And we had no place

to go. I mean my aunts didn't think enough to say, "Well, you could bring your boy friend to the house." So we used to, in the summertime, we spent our time in the park. And the winter in the movies. Then we got married. (She laughs.)

RICHARD: So you'd have a place of your own. Where did you meet your husband?

NORMAN: I met him on the, uh, he lived in the area where my aunts lived. And walking in the street one day, from one aunt to the other, I coughed or something, and he was behind me and he said, "You had better do something about that cough." And so we started talking. And that was it. (She laughs.) He was an American.

RICHARD: He was an American citizen?

NORMAN: Yeah.

RICHARD: Speaking of citizenship, when did you become an American citizen?

NORMAN: Well, we were citizens under my father. He could not have brought us over had he not been a citizen. And so we were naturalized citizens through him. All of us.

RICHARD: Did you have to undergo any name changes? Was your name, did your name stay the same?

NORMAN: No, our name stayed the same.

RICHARD: Your first name and your last name.

NORMAN: No, my first name was B-A-S-I-A. The Russian name, Basia. Yeah, of course, when my aunt, uh, uh, registered me in school, we had gotten out, school had already begun, and she couldn't say Basia, so she said Beatrice.

RICHARD: How was your first year or so at school? Did you enjoy it?

NORMAN: Oh I got into school. It was so strange. Everybody was talking this language and all the kids knew each other and I'm just sitting there. (She laughs.) And then, uh, when we were, I learned to write, I used to write all the words connected. One line. (She laughs.) And, of course, I learned it later. And, you would be surprised as soon as I learned the language, I was very bright, because the teacher always held me up as an example. Why can't you be as good or as smart as this little girl. I said, "Little girl, I'm not a little girl." I was very-- (She laughs.)

RICHARD: I imagine you felt like you had been through quite a bit at that age.

NORMAN: Yeah. And I, uh, had completed the, uh, elementary grades in five years. I skipped so many times. Yeah.

RICHARD: That's great. How far did you get?

NORMAN: Oh, I went to high school and I went to college. I got a college degree. Became a nurse.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. And you've been in New York, the New York area

all this time?

NORMAN: No, I lived and worked in about several different states. Florida, Wisconsin, incidentally, Pewaukee, Wisconsin.

RICHARD: Yeah, I know it well.

NORMAN: That's right. And, uh, Connecticut, Pennsylvania. After I was divorced, that happened. Because I was very restless, and I wanted to get away from the city. Every street I walked on reminded me. So I just had to get away. And my son was in a private school, and I just went from one place to another. And when he got a little older and he came to live with me.

RICHARD: So you do have children.

NORMAN: I have a son and two grandchildren.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. So you've learned to like America? Did it live up to your expectations?

NORMAN: Oh, of course, no, I don't think I would ever want to live in Europe again. I would like to visit. That's about the extent of it.

RICHARD: Do you have curiosity?

NORMAN: Yes I do. I think most people like to visit the place of their birth. Many people, they even go back. Their countries were not as, uh, as, they didn't experience such a terror as we did. Like I know most Italian people, as they get their Social Security,

they go back home. Which, it's nice.

RICHARD: They left under different circumstances.

NORMAN: You know that feeling never leaves one. Even as little as you are. Even today, even though I would never go to live there, just the sound of Russia, is a little stir like, in my heart. Not that I would ever want to go there. Never.

RICHARD: But you would like to see what it was like?

NORMAN: But I would be afraid to go there from fear. You know somehow that fear still remains with you to. I fear perhaps, if I go there, something happens and they detain me there. (She laughs.) All things, all strange things are happening of late as we experienced. And who knows what could happen. I would never want to go to Russia to visit for that reason.

RICHARD: Have you heard anything about what has become of the area where you began?

NORMAN: Where we lived? No, I had only heard when we were here, my grandmother remained there. And she lived with cousins. And the cousins weren't very nice. They ill-treated her. And she used to go to my grandfather's grave to, uh, uh, to relieve her unhappiness. And one winters day, she fell into a ditch, and she never got out of it. And they found her frozen. So that was a sad experience too. But we were already here. Had we been older and wiser, we would say, "If the grandparents are not coming, we're not coming, send the money for them too." They could well have. My father wasn't too well established but his brother had been here for many years before. And he was in business and he had money but such selfishness to leave the grandparents. When I think of it, it's so horrifying to me.

RICHARD: What was your father doing here before you arrived?

NORMAN: Well my father came, he had been a professional out there,  
in Europe.

RICHARD: What sort of professional?

NORMAN: He was a Hebrew teacher. He was highly educated. But when he came here, with the language barrier, he worked in a factory. It was very hard for him. When we lived with him, he used to get up at the crack of dawn and he used to come home very late from his labor. He was carrying bundles of food. He shopped at the market while we were home, you know, kids. And, of course, all the house work fell to me, I was the girl. But I didn't mind it. I was in America. (She laughs.) It was wonderful. And another thing that we heard, that in America, it's a saying, that the, uh, oh the gold, one just had to go out into the street and shovel it out. (She laughs.) Anybody. You've heard that, I guess, many times.

RICHARD: I've heard that, yes.

NORMAN: Well, it was a sort of symbolic of it being the "Land of Opportunity." That's what it really amounted to. (She laughs.)

RICHARD: But I think a lot of people took it literally.

NORMAN: Well, I don't know about that. If they took it literally, they weren't really very much. But that is what it meant. (She laughs.)

RICHARD: How did your dad feel about America? Was he glad that he

had made the move?

NORMAN: How did he feel about us?

RICHARD: About living in America, once he came. It sounds like he had to sort of go beneath his position, as a man of letters.

NORMAN: Well, after a while, he, uh, he was here after a number of years, he began to do his, the work he had done out there. And he was, in his, uh, community he was sort of the pillar of society. Everybody looked up to him. They came to him for advice, etc. And to such extent that, uh, when the widows would come and complain to him, they'd say, "Well, everybody loves you and your sort of the, the head of the community. And Mr. So and So, our landlord. is looking to dispossess us, can't you speak to him in our behalf?" My father did, and he, was good. So he, uh, was very, uh, happy to be here to. And we were very happy. We were proud of him. Yeah. Uh-huh.

RICHARD: Can you think of any customs that you brought with you from Russia? Any sort of interesting things that, that you use to do in the old country that were carried on in your family?

NORMAN: Customs, as to, uh--

RICHARD: Foods that you ate, or clothing that you wore?

NORMAN: Clothing, we didn't have too many there. When we came here, of course, my father up-decked us with new clothing. But food, I remember potatoes, and, uh, bread and potatoes and soup, of course, all the time. None of the, uh, the other goodies. Vegetables or fruit. On the, uh, traveling through, I think we stopped, the train stopped in Germany for a little bit. And we, uh, my brother ran off, and he bought some oranges.

What a strange sight it was, an orange, you know. (She laughs.) What a delightful thing, too, yes. And, in Russia, of course, they eat herring and bread. And herring happens to be a very, uh, healthy food, I learned in my nutritional studies. (She laughs.)

RICHARD: Is this something you continued to eat while you were here?

NORMAN: No, not really. No, I took to all the American, I became Americanized very rapidly.

RICHARD: You did?

NORMAN: To the customs, and the ways, and the things. I learned the language very rapidly. And as I say, in school I was the top student after a while. And I used to always get A, A, A. And then the Bronx, they had a little home newspaper. The kids that got A, A, A, their names would appear in the newspaper. My name was there all the time. So you see, I became, the Americanization of Basia. (She laughs.)

RICHARD: Is there anything else you would like to tell me about?  
Can you sort of just sum up your feelings about the whole experience? Or put in any detail?

NORMAN: Well the whole thing is that, uh, had we remained, had my brother gone off with the, uh, Russian Army, when they were retreating, we probably never would have gotten to this country, and, uh, I don't know what we would have encountered there.

RICHARD: You feel that your life would be completely different?

NORMAN: It certainly would have been completely different, naturally. And first of all, being there, of course, later my father might have brought us out. But then

the quota would of, uh, kept getting smaller and smaller. We may never have been able to come out here. And so many times I wonder what would have happened. Because, you see, unfortunately, which I'm not going to go into, but just in summing it up, unfortunately our life here, because we were dragged around like that, and with out a mother, and my father with his step-mother that he had married, uh, our life wasn't, in that respect, our life wasn't a very, uh, happy life. We were just happy that we were here, and there was freedom, there was no, uh, pogroms of being chased around and being worried and looking out the window to see if they were there or what was happening. That part, of course.

RICHARD: That made up for it.

NORMAN: Oh, of course. That was the whole thing. And naturally, as we get older and we saw what was going on, you know, getting education. It's wonderful. And, it's a great, uh, country. (She laughs.)

RICHARD: I agree.

NORMAN: Yeah. It's beautiful. And when I see people who, uh, who go about speaking about it in a derogatory fashion, or even about the President, I don't care who the President is, if he's the President of this country, it's obvious that many people who found him to be what they want and they chose him. And when I heard that, uh, Reagan was, uh, had cancer. Oh, even though I didn't vote for him, I was very, very upset. Because he was the ruler of our country that really gave us everything that we didn't have there. So it's a wonderful thing. And, and of course, it was very difficult for the immigrants in those years more than it is for the immigrants coming now. Because all these various societies that help them. They find apartments for them and they get them all kinds of entitlement which, of course, as a kid, when the oldest, when the immigrants during my time came, I didn't know about these, but I used to hear mt family and my uncles and aunts talk.

When they came, it was such a struggle for them. Nobody held their hand out. They use to go to work in factories and they had to carry their little sewing machine on their back. Their own machine. Back and forth. And they worked seven days a week, and what not. And now the immigrants, I see them, they can't speak English, they have food stamps, when you go shopping. Really, this country, it's, it's a magnificent thing.

RICHARD: But it's a different story now.

NORMAN: Yeah, and really no one has the right to knock it. Because there's no place in the world that's one hundred percent to everyones liking. And this is by far, the best of all possible worlds out here.

RICHARD: Great. That's great. Well, I think this is it. Thank you very much. It's been really interesting.

NORMAN: Not at all. It's been my pleasure to contribute.

RICHARD: Thank you. This is the end of side two of tape one of Interview Number 119 with Beatrice Norman. It's 2:30.