

KECK-123

MOLLIE SODEL GINN

BIRTH DATE: 1900

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INTERVIEWER: NANCY DALLETT

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THE UKRAINE, 1914

AGE 14

SHIP NAME NOT RECALLED

DALLETT: My name is Nancy Dallett, and I'm speaking with Mollie Ginn on Thursday, January 16, 1986. We are beginning this interview at 2:00 PM and we're about to interview, uh, Mrs. Ginn about her immigration experience from the Ukraine in 1914. This is Interview Number 123, beginning of side one. Take me back to the beginning of your story, if you would, and could you tell me where and when you were born?

GINN: I was born in Zwenigorodja, a small town in the Ukraine.

DALLETT: Could you, could you spell that town for me?

GINN: Yes. Z-W-E-N-I, Zweni, gorodja, G-O-R-A-D-J-A.

DALLETT: Okay. Two words, then, right? Or, all together.

GINN: Zwenigorodja. One word.

DALLETT: And when was that?

GINN: That was, uh, the family thinks it was about 1914, uh
1900.

DALLETT: 1900. Do you remember what life was like in that village
as a, as a little girl?

GINN: Yes. I remember several things. One is a very beautiful
garden of a neighbor.

DALLETT: Was it a flower garden or a vegetable garden?

GINN: Mostly flowers. And it was the daughter of this man. O

also remember a family of Jews who had a gristmill right near us. And they also fed their pigs. So they'd ask the neighbors for the potato peelings, and we could trade. We gave them the peelings, and they gave us potato pancakes. So it was a fair exchange. Another thing that I remember is my father coming home and saying, "You're admitted to the elementary school." There were three people drawing lots. He said I was lucky. "So you can go to the elementary school on the quota system." And I went there for a few years, and when my sister graduated from the Gymnasium with a gold medal, she said to me, "As soon as there's an opening examination for new entrants, I was promised that they'd let me know in time so that you can prepare for the exam. And if you pass the exam, they will admit you under the quota system, which is one percent Jews to ninety-nine percent of the non-Jewish population." And she coached me, and I passed the exam, and I was admitted to the Gymnasium. And the outstanding thing about that Gymnasium experience was in the biology class--

DALLETT: I'm sorry to interrupt, but there's a, there's a noise. Okay.

GINN: In the biology class, on a Spring day, the teacher said, "How would you like to go out? We'll have a field trip near the river." And we lined up two by two, following the teacher. And suddenly a new world opened. She showed us the frogs's eggs, told about the tadpole stage, and then the adult, pointed out the weeds that grew in the water and those on the side. And a whole new world opened up. And I said to my partner, "I'm going to teach biology." She said, "Are you silly? Girls can't teach." But I was still fascinated with biology, and I got a very good mark. And that was the outstanding memory of the school. Another outstanding memory was that we were--(Break in tape,) It was not a big town. It had two higher education schools, a Gymnasium for the girls and a commercial Gymnasium for the boys. The boys invited us to a special performance of the "Inspector General Gogol" that they were giving. The whole school went. And the exciting thing about the play was not only the content of the play, and the costumes, but the fact that they had a meal on the stage. And, of course, being hungry a lot of the time, the meal particularly made an impression. And I recall another incident. This time an encounter with a

peasant. It was a beautiful summer day, and my sister and I walked to the edge of the town and saw some lovely corn-flowers, blue against the gold of the grain. But we didn't know that this was grain that the peasant grew for their food and for sale. So when he saw us he started to run after us with a stick. But, of course, we went right out. He said, "that's my grain." I said, "We only wanted to see the corn-flower." He said, "Remember. Grain is not to be stepped on." And he took the stick away. He said, "Will you remember that?" We said, "Definitely." So the one year that the family had a slightly larger income, my mother said to me, "This year we're going to have a small garden, and you and I will plant it." We did, nasturtiums.

DALLETT: Did, did your mother support the family? Did she have a small business, did you say?

GINN: For one year, and it was a failing business. The only thing was that it gave us some hope. But what really supported us was that my father not only taught the chedar, which is a small Hebrew school right in our home, but he also gave private lessons preparing the sons of

the rich people for the Bar Mitzvah celebration. And he also, because he had a good voice, sang as a cantor on holidays at the synagogue. And it would have been enough, but the rich people didn't pay on time. So, to keep the family going my sisters, in addition to trying to take a correspondence course at a college because Jews were not admitted to colleges. You could only take correspondence courses. And to earn the money that the correspondence course cost she tutored in mathematics, because she was brilliant in math. However, she had to suspend her courses, because often the family needed her money just to feed the family. And occasionally my father would take a job out of town where a little more money could be earned so that he could do without the chedar. But he would have this work in a town. And when he came back he always brought presents for the children, and they were beautiful. And, of course, he graded it. My sister, being the oldest in the family, got the most wonderful. And we got some, too, that were beautiful, but not as expensive. And he explained to us, after all, she helped us eat. And I remember reading a play by Shawn O'Casey, in which he sent for a family (?) him where the daughter worked, she got half of the egg the family could afford,

and the smaller children only got pieces of the egg. And to come back to Zwenigorodja, one year before we left, there was big parade in the town. Oh, yes. The town also had a regiment of officers and soldiers in training.

They led the parade and had a flag that the officers' ladies held, in which they asked people to drop kopecks, and if they had silver coins, to drop those. And there was a lot of contributions. What was it for? An air fleet, one year before the war broke out, in 1914. So that's a memory. (She sighs.) Well, as I said, life was hard. Like my father was a very unusual Hebrew teacher and rabbi and cantor. He allowed my sister to go to the Gymnasium, where she passed the exam, and allowed me to go there, even though we had to attend school on Saturdays. And he was criticized by the Orthodox people.

My father said, "If they want to go, I won't stand in their way. I will let them do everything that will make them realize their potentialities and their dreams." Well, as I said, things were getting harder. There were more pogroms. In fact, an adopted sister of my mother who had married and lived in the town of Kishinev that had the worst pogrom. Fortunately, she and her family survived. And to celebrate it, because this was even

South of us, she sent a basket of grapes called ladyfinger grapes. Long, green grapes. And we wrote her a long letter. First congratulating on surviving and offering any help that we could give, as little as we could. She wrote back saying no. She just thanked the Lord for helping them survive. We had in our town threats of a pogrom but we didn't have one. But I remember, when the threat, because a few drunken peasants, some of them belonging to what they call the Black Hundred, a very reactionary group that were the leaders of the pogroms. And they would give the peasants drink, vodka, get them drunk, and then they would join the pogrom. But we were fortunate. The high officials in the town and the officers of the regiment saw to it that it was not carried out. They stopped them. So, several things made our family and my father and mother and even my older sister begin to think of other ways. A few months before we left, a friend of my sister's was leaving for Palestine as one way of escaping. And my sister went with her friends to give her a going away party. And my father said, "I'll provide the refreshments/" And I still remember that party. Then my family seriously started to figure the possibilities.

Several of my father's friends were in this country. We wrote to them. They said, "Yes. There's plenty of opportunities for a better livelihood and, certainly, for better opportunities for your children." At first my father wanted to leave with my older sister to see whether that was really so because we also had a house that we could stay in. My grandmother was living with us. And he would arrange for the people who wanted to buy the house to pay half of it. But after talking it over several times, my mother and my sister said to my father, "Let the whole family go." We won't be able to take our grandmother. For one thing she's too feeble. For another, the trip might be too hard for her. And she had friends and some relatives. We'll write, and send her money. So we did just that. Sold the house, and rich, uh, clients of my father's paid up their debts. They even gave my mother, just to take her to the train, a fur coat, because it was winter, December. And they said, "Well also provide you with a carriage, and when you have gone into the train, give the driver the fur coat. You won't need it." So we traveled by train to Hamburg, and we stayed in a barracks-like accommodation. But when we paid in some extra money for the third

class, we had the barracks to ourselves, the whole family. And my youngest brother, who's not quite two, looked up and said, "faigele". That means birds. He seen the birds right out of the window. We stayed there for about a week or ten days, were fed good meals. And when Christmas came they even gave us packages of nuts and fruit to celebrate. And when we got on the boat we asked the purser where our room in the third class was. He looked at our sheet, he said, "You're not on the third class list." We said, "We paid in twenty-five rubles." He said, "Well, I'll inquire. But in the meantime I'll have to place you in steerage." And that's where we remained. About the boat trip, since most of us were quite sick, I don't remember too much except that on certain days my father, who was the only one who was not seasick, would come down and say, "Get dressed. It's not bad on the deck, and I think you'll feel better." And he first took up mama, carried my youngest brother all the way around, and then my sister and I followed. We stayed, and we did feel better. And the day before we were to land, we stayed practically all day to get nice red cheeks and look bright-eyed.

DALLETT: What had you heard about what might happen at Ellis Island or did you, did you know what to expect when, when you landed in this country?

GINN: Yes. We expected to be examined at Ellis Island because I told you this friend of my father's who was going to meet us, and because the boat was landing on Saturday he talked to the HIAS and they notified us on the boat that our friend would meet us on land at the HIAS. When we came into Ellis Island, I remember that we got for the, one of the officials, they guided us through a long corridor. And he said, "We hope to finish the examination soon." Of course, they spoke to us through an interpreter.

DALLETT: What languages, what languages were you speaking, did your father speak?

GINN: Well, my sister said we should, that she and I speak Russian. My father understands, but doesn't speak it. And that, if they could speak in Yiddish, get a Yiddish interpreter, everybody would understand, and that's what they did. They were very helpful, but it took longer

than they expected. They said, "It's too bad we don't have provisions for serving food, but we have people selling sandwiches, and hot coffee or tea, and it's not expensive. And if you don't have the money, we'll lend it to you." We said no. We knew that we had to have some money, so we kept it for the arrival. In fact, we had fifty rubles, so that we could get a flat immediately and settle the family and not burden our friends.

DALLETT: Do you remember anything else that you brought with you?

GINN: Yes.

DALLETT: That the family packed up from the house?

GINN: Yes. We brought family silver and we brought a mortar and pestle that had been in the family for generations, and I have it here on my table. We also brought bedding because the bedding was made with goose down. And we hid the silver in the bedding. But they slashed the bedding and our, most of our silver was gone.

DALLETT: I have to interrupt, just because we're at the end of the

tape here. This is the end of side one of Interview Number 123 with Mollie Ginn.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DALLETT: This is the beginning of side two of Interview Number 123 with Mollie Ginn. Where had the, uh, the bedding been slashed? Who did that? How did that happen?

GINN: We asked, and HIAS told us that there are certain elements that occasionally get in, and they're very apt at their trade, so that nobody knows how they knew what they were after.

DALLETT: Did it happen on the boat or at Ellis Island or you just don't know?

GINN: We think it was at Ellis Island, but it may have been on the boat. We don't know. However, that didn't matter, because the really wonderful thing was that our whole family passed the examination, medical examination. And

we saw that we were put on the line without any chalk marks that we saw on other people. We asked about those chalk marks, and they told us it meant that they had to be examined more carefully to see whether they could be admitted, or whether they'd have to be deported. And they said that even deportation was not final. They can take care of that problem, and come back again when they were better. We also learned later that the second class didn't go through such a procedure.

DALLETT: Do you remember what the physical examination was like when they examined you, the doctors?

GINN: Yes. I remember they looked in the eyes, they looked at the head, and then they examined the chest. That was it.

DALLETT: Do you remember them asking your father any questions about who was here that might help to support him, or what he might do in this country?

GINN: After the medical examination, that's when we had the interview where they asked my father what he had done in the old country, and what he hoped to do here. He said

in the old country he was a teacher, but he wasn't earning a living, though he is willing to do anything. He also had to add to that special lessons that he had to give, sometimes working until ten at night, and working during the holidays as a cantor. They said, "A cantor? You have nothing to worry about. Why they are worth their weight in gold, and even a teacher. They have all kinds of Yeshivas, Hebrew schools. And if you have any problems, talk it over with HIAS." I said, "What does that mean?" He said, "Hebrew Immigrant Aid. They help you." And, of course, the interpreter was translating all, and they were most helpful. We said, "How do we get to that Hebrew Aid? That's where our friend is meeting us." They said, "Well, i a little while, the boat will arrive that will take you from Ellis Island to the mainland and that HIAS is likely to have an agent right there, and he will take you to their office. And that's where you'll meet your friend."

DALLETT: What was your family's name when you, when you came through?

GINN: Sodel. S-O-D-E-L. That's the initial that I have, for

my middle name.

DALLETT: And there was, was there any problem with them understanding your last name? Did they, was it shortened or anything like that?

GINN: No, because it was a short name and it's a very common name. So we didn't have to change it or anything.

DALLETT: And how long do you think it, it took to go through this processing on Ellis Island?

GINN: I think almost a day, because we got off the boat some time in the morning. Whether it was early or late morning I don't remember. But I remember that by the mid-afternoon we were looking around for something to eat. Very hungry. And after that we did, we still had to wait for the interview and for the boat to take us, for the ferry to take us to the mainland.

DALLETT: Tell me what happened when you took the ferry and came to Manhattan.

GINN: Well, we came there, the agent called our friend. He announce papa. He said, "Oh, yes. He's waiting for you." And we walked with him to his house and he said, "Of course you heard about the tragedy in our family." So my father said yes, but we don't, we didn't quite understand. So he told us one of his daughters died in a Triangle fire. But he said, "You know, life goes on. In our religion, we say, 'to life', so now I'm particularly anxious that my children get the best education and lead an easier life." And I, he said to my father, "And that is why you came here." He said, "Yes." He said, "You'll stay with us tonight. My wife prepared a special dinner. My children are looking forward to meeting you and the children. And tomorrow we will look for a flat." And the next day they found a flat just two blocks away from out friend, on Cherry Street.

DALLETT: What was, what was Cherry Street like at that time?

GINN: Cherry Street?

DALLETT: Yeah. Was it anything like where you had come from?

GINN: No. The whole city overwhelmed us. And the most overwhelming thing, of course, was the moment we arrived on the boat from Hamburg, when we landed, was the Statue of Liberty. And the Russian schools had taught geography very well and biology very well. They were very thorough. A complete description of the Statue of Liberty, including the fact that one could walk into the thumb, and the inscription on it welcoming the immigrants. So, of course, when we went on deck and saw the Statue of Liberty we were thrilled. And another thing that thrilled, when the ferryboat brought us to the land, we saw green lawns in January, because we remembered, and in Zwenigorodja, January was deep winter, and had the snow from October to March. And maybe even the beginning of April and that sometimes, even though this, the Ukraine is in the South of Russia, some days were so cold that we would hang our black flags in the town to notify the children and their families no school that day. You asked about Cherry Street, what it was like. Well, it was tenements and Jews and Irish. Small families, and very large families. And horse drawn streetcars. And an accident, of a child run over by one of those streetcars, we remember. We lived up on the

fifth floor. And so the children wouldn't have to run up five flights to get something, we would throw down. They'd call up, and they'd throw down the money or the package or whatever, and the children would get, go to the store, get the things, and then lug it up five flights. We were fortunate. We got a flat facing the river. That's how we were so enchanted. We saw the tugboats. Also you could walk on dock and see the tugboats and wave to the captains. And there was a small park and the school was only a block away.

DALLETT: And did your father continue to teach, start teaching Hebrew school?

GINN: First he went to another job, because he said he was willing to do anything, and this friend of my father's said, "I know someone who has a tailor shop. I can get you a job." So he went to the tailor shop and he was shown how to iron things. He started ironing. Some things he didn't iron so well. So he came back to see his friend and said, "You know I'm not doing so well on the job. Could you tell me where there are Yeshivas and Hebrew schools?" He said, "Yes. There's one only five

blocks away on Henry Street, the best Yeshiva in the country, the Rabbi Jacob Joseph's School. Why don't you go there with your credentials? You'll do very well." He said, "Right." He went there, and they said, "Right now we don't have an opening, but we expect one soon. In the meantime, we'll give you a list of Hebrew schools where you can teach in the afternoon." "At the Yeshiva," he said, "we teach in the morning, and then they teach English in the afternoon. It's an all day school." Now, the children who went to learn Hebrew, and for one reason or another do not go to the Yeshiva, go to these Hebrew schools, and they go after their regular public school. Well, my father got a job in a Hebrew school and, sure enough, within a month or two, he got a letter asking him to come for an interview, and he got the job. And later we learned that one of the teachers in that school was Abraham Sawyer. He became a friend of my father's, and later went back, Raphael, Sawyer's son, the artist.

DALLETT: And were you in the public schools when you first came?

GINN: Yeah. And that's a very interesting story. Because I didn't know any English. (Husband speaks.) I said that.

DALLETT: Yeah, we know.

GINN: I went to the first grade. As soon as I learned a few words, I went through the entire elementary school in one year and then I was admitted to the free high school. Free public school, free high school. It was heaven for me. And Washington Irving. And the class that I was in, when we finished the first year of biology we said, "Is there another year of biology?" They said, "No." So we said, "What a shame. There's so much more we want to learn." And the teacher said to us, "Go to the principal, Dr. Zabriske." He said, "You know what a wonderful gentleman he is, because he greeted, greets the entering class, and he and the dean entertained the entering class at that time at the fireplace with tea and cookies and a blazing fire in the hearth." So we knew we could talk to him. He said, "How wonderful you want to learn more biology. And in High school. Is it possible, Frederick?" He said, "Well, get fifteen of your biology classmates to sign a petition. We'll see what we can do." And that was the first year I had a class in advanced biology, and it went on--

DALLETT: And you continued to, to study biology, well beyond.

GINN: Right. I continued to study it both in high school, Hunter College and -- (Husband speaks.) And also graduate work at Columbia University, as soon as I got a job and I was able to pay for the graduate work. But after graduating high school I was awarded a scholarship, a regents scholarship, because of my grades, and Hunter College was free. The scholarship made it possible for me to get whatever needs I had without too much assistance from the family. However, when one of the teachers told me about special courses, summer courses at Cold Spring Harbor, and that wonderful course of Life Under the Sea. I went for an interview to see whether I could get a scholarship. Well, I didn't, but my father said to me, "Don't worry. If you want to go, I'll see what I can do." And the professor at Hunter College said, "If you need a microscope, you don't have to buy it. We will lend it to you for the summer." And they did that, and my father made the tuition. It was only seventy-five dollars, and I was indebted. And that paid not only for the tuition, but also my room and board. Incredible, just like a dream come true.

DALLETT: And your father, when did he become a citizen?

GINN: My father and mother, both went to evening school to become citizens. (Husband speaks.)

DALLETT: Uh-huh. Your husband's whispering to me that you got a gold medal at, at, uh, Hunter College?

GINN: Right. (Husband speaks.)

DALLETT: And so did you get your citizenship from the fact that your parents had become citizens, or did you do that--

GINN: No. Only my younger brothers. But my sister and I got citizenship on our own.

DALLETT: On your own. And how many years after you had been here did you do that?

GINN: I think I got my citizenship some time in the '20's, or maybe earlier. I don't remember, really. But I remember taking the exam with flying colors. And I'm delighted.

DALLETT: Did other people come from, uh, I'm sorry, I can't pronounce the name of the, the town that you came from, but did others follow after you had come here?

GINN: No. Some had come here before. For instance, Ellman's father, came to see our family when he heard that we were here because my father came, originally, from a town where Ellman's-- (Husband speaks.)

DALLETT: Right. The violinist, right.

GINN: Where Ellman's family lived. My father and Misha Ellman's father went to the same Hebrew school. Then they continued the friendship and my father went to see Ellman before we left, no, we went to see Ellman sometime when he had married. Ellman, by that time, had a young son, Misha. Misha was sitting on his father's knee, playing the fiddle at age three. And Misha Ellman's father said he must have inherited it from our grandfather. He was a fiddler, hired by the barons for their celebrations to play the fiddle at.

DALLETT: That's amazing. Uh, did your father feel comfortable soon after he got settled in this country? Was he sure that he had made the right decisions for coming?

GINN: Yes. Yes, because he taught Hebrew. He said to all the children, my oldest sister and two brothers, "Go as far as you can. This is your opportunity. If you need help and we can give it to you, we will. If not, work to help yourself." And we did. My brother, not the youngest one, but the one next to it, went on and studied law and became a lawyer, married and had children. My sister married and had two children, a son and then the younger child, a daughter, Louise. And both her children are Ph.D.'s, so the family goes right on. (Husband speaks.)

DALLETT: Just one other question. Do you have any of the original papers from when you first came to this country?

GINN: My sister had her diploma. I had stopped without getting any papers because I was still at the beginning of my education.

DALLETT: Passport, or any of the original passports from your

family?

GINN: I don't.

DALLETT: Citizenship papers?

GINN: I have them somewhere.

DALLETT: But you do have, I see here, you mentioned the mortar and pestle that you brought with you.

GINN: Right, right. That the family brought and gave to me because I married first. They decided that was the thing to give me. After Hunter, she went to Columbia, the same school that I went to.

DALLETT: Yes. I think I've asked you everything I need to, unless there's just anything else you want to add about your whole experience.

GINN: Offhand I can't think of anything except that being the only surviving member of my immediate family has been both hard and also very wonderful. Hard because of

illnesses in the family and deaths in the family, but as we believe, life goes on. And it has, because I now have great, great nieces and nephews from my family, from my husband's family, and in each generation we see is getting more and more advanced and the wonderful opportunities that have been offered to us on this land, the U.S.A.

DALLETT: Hmm. Okay. Thank you very much.

GINN: Thank you.

DALLETT: That's the end of side two and the end of the Interview Number 123 with Mollie Ginn, and it is 3:00.