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DR. MORRIS MOEL
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THE UKRAINE, 1922
AGE 9

DALLETT: My name is Nancy Dallett and I'm speaking with Dr. Morris Moel on Tuesday, February 4th, 1986. We are beginning this interview at 4 PM and we are about to interview Dr. Moel about his immigration experience from The Ukraine in 1922. This is side one of Interview Number 133. Can we start back at the beginning of your story, and could you tell me where and when you were born?

MOEL: I was born in 1913 in a town called Lubar in the Ukraine. It's about thirty to fifty miles from the larger cities of Zitomer and Berdechev.

DALLETT: Can you help me spell both of those?

MOEL: Z-I-T-O-M-E-R. And Berdechev is B-E-R-D-E-C-H-E-V. I am told that I was ten years old when my father left for the United States in 1913.

DALLETT: 1913.

MOEL: And he left before the war began, World War One. And he expected to come back, but because of the war interference he was not able to come back. And we did not hear from him for eight years. During that period my mother was taking care of four children, of which I was the youngest. She always hoped to hear from him, but she began to almost lose hope, not having heard all those years. During that period we had experienced great hardship. The war was going on in Russia. The Russia War was going badly. The soldiers we saw passing by as they came back from the fronts in torn uniforms, no shoes, and they were stealing whatever they could. And the people that they generally would abuse were any of the Jewish population. During that period we experienced pogroms. During that period of the pogrom, which, as I recall, was in the summertime, we were all hiding. And at one period we could not trace each other. My mother didn't know where her children were. And after the period of the pogrom was over, which was only a matter of one or two days, the place was in very bad harassment. There were fires, there was murder, there were wounded people, mostly Jews. We finally were able to gather and find each other. During the war, and this seems to be after the World War was actually over and the Armistice was signed, there was still battling going on between the Poles and the Russians. Because I remember distinctly seeing the Polish uniforms with the four-cornered hats in grey, and they were right along our roadway which was right near out house. The battle was going on and we had to dodge the bullets by hitting the floor. We had an earthen floor in our house and machine guns were outside. And at one time the soldiers were bivouac in front of our home. And we could see them during the night and during the day. Many times as a child I remember some of our, not neighbors, but the Gentile people, would attempt to enter a house and we would all be awakened at two or three o'clock in the morning, screaming for help. And finally our screams were able to keep them away from coming in. We had doors jammed. We had the windows locked, everything, but there was always that fear that something was going to happen. My father, when he left, had left money with a so-called banker, which was really a private individual. And there was sufficient funds to take care of us up to a

certain period. But of course he expected to come home within a short period and therefore the money ran out. So my mother had to find other ways to maintain the family and she did my hides. And would sell them to the people in the area. And also the, we also did some selling of vodka to some of the people in the neighborhood, mostly Gentiles who were quite, vodka drinkers, the Russians generally are. I must tell you that in this house, which wasn't a very big house, we had my mother and four children, my aunt and her daughter, her husband was gone, and my grandmother. To continue, one very cold winter day we received, oh, before that, I must go back a moment. During the summer we did get a message that there was money in a, Warsaw bank, through the HIAS, that my father had sent from America. He could not get it into Russia so that it was necessary for my mother to leave to go to Warsaw to make arrangements for us to come there.

DALLETT: Do you remember her actually leaving?

MOEL: Oh yes, I remember her leaving, going to Warsaw. The time element, however, is a little bit hazy.

DALLETT: But the plan was that she would send for you?

MOEL: That she would either come back or send for us. I think she intended to come back. However, she was unable to get back. The border restrictions were getting much worse and it was difficult to cross the border without being endangered. Therefore, she was in Warsaw, I judge about three, perhaps four months, before she finally was able to get an emissary or a smuggler to bring us to Warsaw. And I very distinctly remember the day that we got the information that the, this person was looking for us and he finally got us, found the place where we lived. In the meantime, while my mother was away, leaving us with my grandmother, my grandmother died. It's interesting that I was sleeping in the same bed with my grandmother on the night she passed away. My mother never knew that and we did not want in any way inform her until we were able to reach her which

was several months after her passing. This man came on a, on a Sunday. He said you had to get ready to leave now. And he brought in some clothes, heavier clothes. He brought in some felt shoes, big boots or shoes, which were maybe three times the size of my foot. And my foot, my feet were wrapped in rags to fill in and also to counter the very cold weather. We took our bedding, feather bedding, and we went on the sleigh. Rode all day on the sleigh. Very, very cold. And we hit a town someplace near the Russian border.

DALLETT: Who was traveling at this time?

MOEL: The children. The four children were traveling in this sleigh. We stayed over night in this border town and late that evening we started off on the sleigh again to actually get to the border. and when we got there we were dismounted. And we were ready to cross. In the meantime a number of other people were assembled. And they were also part of the group that was supposed to cross the border. We started out, by this time it was dark. And we went into the forest, a heavy dark forest. And, of course, he had some other, a couple of other guys with him, the main force involved in this. And we walked and walked and walked and suddenly we heard in Russian the words "halt". And we heard the juggling of the guns and the, the magazines as if they were ready to fire. And we were stopped. Every one of us was searched. All valuables were taken from the group. And then we were sent, we were told to go back. After walking all this time. We did go back. But the guides circumvented this same area and finally we started crossing again in this heavy forest. Suddenly we were out of the forest and we were out in the clear, what looked like a plain area, but under this heavy snow were furrows and ditches. And I had to be dragged, as the little one, with all these big shoes on me, had to be dragged across the field for several miles until we were able to get through, this represented the Polish border. And we got into a house where all of us were placed. We were on the floor. We went to sleep for a while, and late that morning we were taken, I don't recall how, but we got to the train station, and that was the first time that I had ever seen a train. We were placed on the train and traveled all night until we got to Warsaw. Warsaw station we

were put on a carriage and we were taken to this man's apartment where my mother was waiting for us. And of course as soon as we saw my mother, you can imagine the emotions that were involved. And we then told her about my grandmother's passing. From then, of course, we went to the apartment where my mother had secured for us to stay. We were in Warsaw for a period, I would judge, between six to eight months. The reason we were there, there were two reasons. One, that we had to wait for the visa which was issued on the basis of quotas. And also it was found that my oldest brother and my sister had trachoma. It had to be treated and cured before they would allow us each to go to America. That took many months. It took many, many surgical procedures. Scraping of the eyelids. The inside of the eyelid, on both my brother and my sister. My brother, who was supposed to have had it worse, was cured. And apparently my sister was cured. We finally got the visa to leave and we left for Antwerp by train. When we were in Antwerp we again had to be examined and they found that there was still some residual inflammatory process, so we had to stay there, as I understood, a week or two, for further treatment of my brother. and finally we were allowed to leave on the ship called the Lapland on the Red Star Line, Cunard. The trip across the sea was about ten days. It was very tiring. We had a cabin with four bunks. Two lower and two upper. And we all stayed in this cabin. I don't know what class you would consider that but I imagine that it was not the worst, but certainly not the best. We got very sick on the ship and I remember so many people in different uniforms and different ethnic clothes, standing along side the railing and doing their bit. Then as we approached the harbor, I began to hear words like, "Columbus." And they were looking at the Statue of Liberty, which was in the distance. And the people, many of the people, thought that this represented a statue of Columbus. And to the it was the same as we know it today as the Statue of Liberty, because it represented Liberty. We then sailed across the harbor. It was on a Sunday and the ship was put into port and many people got off. But we stayed until the next day, I believe, or the next morning, when the ferry came along and took us to Ellis Island. We entered the Great Hall of Ellis Island and before I even knew what happened, my sister disappeared. They apparently found that she still had the residual traces of glaucoma. My brother, who was supposed to have been worse--

DALLETT: Glaucoma?

MOEL: Trachoma. I'm sorry. Who was supposed to have been worse, he apparently was cured. Then there was a time when we didn't know what was happening. In the meantime my father came, had come into New York.

DALLETT: Where was your father living?

MOEL: In Huntington.

DALLETT: Huntington, West Virginia.

MOEL: He originally came to Cincinnati where we had relatives. And he found a business in Huntington so he came from Cincinnati to Huntington. I'm trying to get my thoughts back.

DALLETT: Sorry. Ellis Island, your sister disappears--

MOEL: Yeah. The next phase is what happened in Ellis Island. In Ellis Island we couldn't get into the country because of my sister's problem. My father was able to get some help through one of the citizens of Huntington who, at the time, I believe, was president of the B'nai B'rith. However, the B'nai B'rith had nothing to do with it. It simply was that this man had influence. He happened to own all the four movie houses in the city and he had influence in the capitol and at any rate somehow the senator from the state of West Virginia, by the name of Southerland at that time, was contacted. and also through the aid of a relative of mine, who was then living in New York, by the name of Goodman, they were able to hold back our being (break in tape here). Finally we were given an option, that is, my mother was given the option, of either taking the whole family back

to Antwerp or to allow my sister to go by herself. And my sister was only one year older than me. I guess this must have been a terrible decision for my mother to make, but in order for her to go back we had to provide a guardian. We did get a guardian and she was sent back to Antwerp, where she stayed in some kind of an institution, I really don't what it was. Anyway, she was there and then we went on to Huntington. and my first experience getting across from Ellis Island into New York itself, New York which I had been looking at the ta;; buildings for these several weeks, was so far away, and yet so near. And finally, we were on the shores of New York City where my father and the rest of the family were put on the train, on the B & O train, and went on to Huntington.

DALLETT: Okay, before we go in to Huntington and life there, I just want to see if you can fill in some details about Ellis Island. How long were you detained there?

MOEL: In my judgement we were there about three or four weeks. I remember the bunks that we slept in. I remember the food that we were given.

DALLETT: Can you tell me about the bunks and the food?

MOEL: Well, the bunks were also ups and downs, lower and upper. We had what looked like army blankets and pillows. It was comfortable, but we were in a mass type of occupation, that is, everybody in the same room. There were literally dozens of people sleeping in a dormitory.

DALLETT: Were you separated from your mother?

MOEL: No, we were together. The--

DALLETT: So the whole family did get to stay together.

MOEL: Except for my sister. My sister was in the isolation. And I never did see my sister in Ellis Island. I never saw her when she went back to Antwerp. The food was new food to us. Not the way we prepared it, but it was adequate. I do remember one thing. The children were always given graham crackers and milk between meals. They would come around in the afternoon and provide us with these items. We were, we were compelled almost, to take a shower every evening with green soap.

DALLETT: Do you remember the medical examination that you went through?

MOEL: I, no I don't. and I don't think that I rally went through anything except a very cursory type of examination. There was nothing on my record and I presume that I went through with ease, and I did go through with ease.

DALLETT: Were you able to see your father while you were on Ellis Island?

MOEL: Yes. He came to visit us several times and it was almost, of course we were locked in. It was like a prison in a sense.

DALLETT: You were just meeting your father, right, for the first time?

MOEL: Oh, yes, for the first time. And it was quite an experience. I can't really express it the way I felt at the time. But it was something new. I had a father finally. And he came quite frequently to visit. It's not easy, you know, you had to cross the (break in tape). We had visits from a, this aunt of my mother's, who for the

first time brought us bananas and peaches which I had never seen before. The peaches were a little bit difficult to eat when you, with the skin, it felt like it was hair you know, but we got used to the hair.

DALLETT: What languages were you speaking?

MOEL: I spoke Russian believe it or not, I couldn't, I could hardly remember a word today. I spoke Yiddish and Russian. I had no schooling, I was an illiterate, when I came to this country and started school. I was nine and a half years old.

DALLETT: Why was it, a child of twelve, a young boy would have no schooling?

MOEL: Well, I was nine and a half, but I was eight when I left. My brothers had some schooling, my older brother had gone to the Gymnasium which was quite advanced, during the war there was no way and during the pogroms there was just no way that I was able to go to any, even to what they call cheder, I couldn't go to that, there was just no provision for that, so I was really illiterate and I might point out to you that I was put in 1A and I went the whole semester, not knowing the alphabet, the teacher didn't provide any help and when the semester was over I remained in 1A. I flunked. I don;t think this would happen today, but that is what happened. When my father realized that I had not passed the 1A grade, he immediately sat me down, even though he was not that literate himself, he taught the A-B-C's and how to form simple words, in one evening. The next day I arrived in class and I turned out to be one of the smartest in the class. It's rather uh, unusual, I'm sure

that anything like this could happen but obviously it was something, that in a smaller community, the teachers were not readily aware of the problems that an immigrant might have (break in tape).

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DALLETT: Today is Tuesday, February 4, 1986 and it is the beginning of side two, Interview Number 133. What was it like to get adjusted to life in Huntington, West Virginia?

MOEL: Well, it was not that hard for a person of my age, although I did not know the language, it was interesting that we met some friends of my age who obviously knew that I was an immigrant and obviously they were making some fun of me and they taught some four letter words uh, which they explained to me were words that were respectable and I began to use them on people and uh, it was quite embarrassing. After awhile we found out, of course, that theses were not the, real meaning that was given to these four letter words. But it was embarrassing trying to become Americanized, it was much easier for me, was much more difficult for my mother but she tried very hard and eventually began to make it. I began to skip grades, my other brother, second brother, he was put in 5A and demoted to 4B before he was able to make it and with summer schools that I took, I was able to make up those years that I didn't have the opportunity to go to school and of course we became very much part of the community, my mother and father, but my mother in particular wanted to be sure that we all had proper education. We're all medically inclined and we all played instruments. We had our own uh, almost little orchestra in the family and I for one was more prominent in musical circles in the city than my other brothers and at one time, my mother was able to save up enough money to even send me to the conservatory in Cincinnati during the summers.

DALLETT: How was your father supporting the family in West Virginia?

MOEL: Oh, he had a cleaning store, a men's clothing store and just making a living, not a lot of money. But he was able to support us and we went through the Depression, we were able to make it, uh, my older brother was the only one that did not have the opportunity that we had in schooling because he had to help in the store and therefore he had an equivalent to a high school education, but the rest of us went to college.

DALLETT: And were there other Russian Jews that were in Huntington, West Virginia, or were you the only--

MOEL: There were Jews, there were a few that were, that came earlier, but we were the, we were immigrants that had come. Actually after the war, all the other people that I am aware of, came before the war and they were already Americanized. The number of Jewish people that, of course that we were involved with, there were only about two hundred families all tolled in the city. I went through college, went to the University of West Virginia, and then went through medical school, in the meantime I was also playing in the orchestra. I was the concert master of the college orchestra and I also played the violin, that was my major instrument but I played the clarinet and the saxophone in the dance band and made a little money, that helped me go through medical school. I don't know how much further you want me to go.

DALLETT: Okay, keep going.

MOEL: But I went through, entered medical school and graduated from the University of Cincinnati and served internship in Cincinnati and spent three years in New

York in radiology as a resident and I went into the Service from New York and I was appointed assistant director of McClosky General Hospital which was the largest general hospital, main general hospital, army hospital, in the United States. It was a center for neuro-surgery and amputees. I served nearly four years in the army and then from there I went, we went to Chicago to Mount Sinai Hospital for one year, didn't like Chicago and I was made, uh given an apartment for thirty years and retired from there.

DALLETT: Is it possible for you to remember what your impressions were about what life was going to be like in America, did your mother, well you didn't have letters from your father but I don't know how you would have even formed that impression?

MOEL: I think that it's almost a cliche, if you will, to understand the imagination of the Russian who was trying to escape, was that he was going to the "Golden Land," the Golden Medina as the called it. And it was something that you longed for and the fact is that we got here, even though we came under difficulties and it was somewhat difficult to adjust, uh, not as far as I was concerned, yet it was the greatest land that we could imagine and my mother would literally kiss the earth to stay here, she would never leave this country, most, many, many people would like to go to Israel, many Jews, she wouldn't even want to go to Israel because, she supported them, but she would not go to Israel or any place else. It was fortunate I think, to come to a smaller community where we had to adjust and we became Americanized much quicker than if we had gone to a larger city.

DALLETT: What did that mean, to become Americanized, how did it feel, when did you think you were?

MOEL: Well, I'm thinking primarily of my mother's problem, really, uh, the fact that she had to go to the market and express herself as to what she needed to buy, she didn't have the resources of going to a New York market where she could speak in Yiddish,

she had to express herself in English, she had to learn to dress the way the people in the city dressed, whereas in a larger city she could have mixed with the community which might have maintained the old customs, she couldn't do that. She had to learn how to cook a little differently because we as children going to school, learned a little bit about what we were supposed to eat, how we were supposed to dress and those things were a reflection to her from our experiences in school and our experiences with other children. So it was important that we become Americanized. She, and by the way, my mother began to go to school herself, night school, and she immediately began to study for citizenship because, I must add this, that one of the reasons that I believe my sister was sent back was because my father neglected to become a citizen all this time that he was here and my mother made sure that she was going to become a citizen, God forbid that she might be sent back, if she was a citizen that she wouldn't be sent back and she and I studied together about the Constitution, about the presidents, the first president, the second president, about Lincoln, about the uh, portions of the government, the Executive, the Judicial, and the Congressional, she knew all these things and she did pass the examination and it was one of the happiest days of her life when she became a citizen.

DALLETT: So what year was that, do you know?

MOEL: She became a citizen, I think, in 1928 or'29. My father finally became a citizen in 1927.

DALLETT: And did you get citizenship?

MOEL: We became citizens by derivation.

DALLETT: What about your sister, she spent a year, you said, in Antwerp--

MOEL: Now, getting back to my sister. My sister stayed a year in Antwerp, and she, apparently they felt she was cured and they sent her back to this country. When she got to Ellis Island, they re-examined her and they found that she was not cured and again we had to have a chaperon and they sent her back to Antwerp.

DALLETT: Did you see her when she came to Ellis Island?

MOEL: No, my mother and father went there, I didn't see her. And she stayed in Antwerp for four more years and she finally came back in 1927 and it was by this time a young lady and she started, she had taken French and a little bit of English in Belgium and she was put into seventh grade , I believe, and she went on to uh, it was difficult for her too, but she went on to go to college.

DALLETT: I hate to keep harping on this getting adjusted period but I'm just curious, are there any things that you remember that were really shocking or really new to you when you first came to West Virginia, that they were so different from Russia, the weather, the food--

MOEL: Well, in my eyes, no, because I guess at my age, first of all, I don't think that you can detect an accent on me, but from my sister, you can get, you could have gotten it from my older brother but uh, I adjusted and I don't really have any recollection of an great difficulty. It was only the first year or two that I had difficulty because of the language, to learn how to speak to learn some of the customs and so on, but it wasn't that difficult for me. It was much more difficult for my mother and she still had some old fashioned ideas and I think there was a conflict at times. Trying to modernize your parents and sometimes you felt ashamed of it because they would want to speak in that language and in a smaller

community where there, where you were in an English community, an American community, I think the youngster like myself felt embarrassed to have to speak to her in Yiddish, whereas besides that I try to convey to here that's important for her speak, to try to speak English.

DALLETT: Well, on the reverse, were there any things that uh, any Russian customs that she actually could maintain, that she passed along to you?

MOEL: No, except, just her cooking is about the only thing that was left really, uh, I don't recall anything that I can recall that was really Russian. My father, who had been here longer, he would, he would try to recall and tell stories about what he experienced and I have the recollection we didn't particularly want to hear those things. We wanted to be American. I'd like to relate a very interesting situation that I recall. It was very traumatic for my mother. In Russia, even with my father gone, Saturday, the Sabbath, was a day that you did not work. You didn't do any cooking, you didn't do anything, besides that, my mother kept a kosher house. The first Sabbath that we were here, she expected that Saturday you have to get dressed up, you get the clean, the first Saturday she expected, she prepared Friday night for Saturday dinners and so on. First Saturday she got up and she thought that my father would go to synagogue, my father got up and went to the store. My mother cried like a baby, it was so new, that's another phase of Americanization, if you will, she's never, she couldn't forget it for weeks but then she realized that you had to make a living and that's the way it was. Another time, my father wasn't exactly, didn't keep the kosher ritual, uh, we were in the store and we were

all working, I would work on Saturday and he went, we couldn't go out to lunch so he brought in a chicken from one of the restaurants and uh, my mother wanted to know where the chicken came from. He told her, "Well that chicken wasn't kosher." That was another traumatic incident, those are things that we experienced, my mother experienced.

DALLETT: Did she continue then to keep a kosher home?

MOEL: Oh yes, she did. I have another incident. When I was a youngster going to school, I used to sell papers, deliver papers, I would sell them on the street and also have a route. And uh, across from the newspaper building was a hotdog stand and the kids would buy these hotdogs and I had a kosher house, I couldn't eat it and it would just, I would die really and finally one day I couldn't hold it back anymore and went over there with five cents and bought a hotdog with all the trimmings and that was a time when I broke the kosher laws and from then on it was easy.

DALLETT: Have you ever gone back to visit Ellis Island?

MOEL: Yes, I have. About fur years ago we were visiting my daughter, who incidentally, has a great desire to know my history and had known about my experience on Ellis Island, had gone to Ellis Island on her own, and she said, "Dad, I'd like to go with you." And so we went. It was quite a memorable experience to me because it renewed the old, old scenes and it recalled the whole mystery of our coming here but what was disappointing was the dilapidated appearance of the Island, the place where we used to sleep, I visited, it was really, practically destroyed. The uh, I recognized the main hall, it was in disrepair but still recognizable and it left a real nostalgic feeling an I still have a nostalgia for that great, great entry. It was the gate to heaven if you will.

DALLETT: One other thing, do you have any of the original papers when you first came through, anything like that, any photos?

MOEL: A passport is available, my sister has the passport.

DALLETT: Okay.

MOEL: And it was, I called her and she had the, and one date was very important, the date stamped on the passport indicated that we arrived in Antwerp on the 23rd of June, 1922. We were in Antwerp as I indicated between one and two weeks and we took about ten days to sail so we got here, I would judge, around the latter part of July, on Ellis Island, or middle of July, no it would have been a little different than that, maybe the end of June, yeah about the middle of July so we stayed about two, three weeks, or four weeks and we got here the first part of August.

DALLETT: The photo that you showed me from the book, is that a passport photo?

MOEL: Yes, that's a passport photo taken in 1921.

DALLETT: '21, with your mother and the children.

MOEL: That's right.

DALLETT: Anything else, like a ship ticket or anything like that?

MOEL: No.

DALLETT: Citizenship papers?

MOEL: I have a citizenship paper, they're in my box.

DALLETT: Would you happen to have your mother's?

MOEL: No, no I don't.

DALLETT: Okay, I think I've asked you everything I need to unless there's anything at all you'd just want to add.

MOEL: Maybe, Lucille, you have anything that you can recall that I related to you? Can't always remember everything.

(His wife speaks off-mike)-- I think one very interesting thing about coming to America, becoming Americanized, and wanting to be so much a part of the United States, was a little incident. I remember my mother-in-law would finally go on Saturday to work, which was really against her religion, but she compromised a certain way, you're not supposed to tear anything, well it's ironical that you could handle the money, but not tear, so she'd stay in the store and she'd wrap a package and she tied the string and she'd give the person, to the individual, say, "Here's your merchandise, come back in again," then the customer would walk half way to the door and the string from the cord had never been cut, and she say, "Hey, mister, I forgot to cut the cord, would you just tear for me," (they laugh). So they had these conflicts of knowing that she had to earn money to give her children an education, she never cared so much for herself, this is what I think is very interesting, in many families when the parents have come together, come to America and they saw that their children were educated they began to think about themselves, but she felt that she was so lucky 'cause, you know, I happen to have been her favorite daughter-in-law so she used to tell me these stories of how she felt, you know, about being in America, and

that her family would never have survived, however its only in the last few years of her life that she ever talked about her experiences in Europe, did she sing any Russian songs, she had a gorgeous voice--

MOEL: I just wanted to say, she had, my mother, all of us, my father had a beautiful voice too, but when she was down here, she lived down here for several years, she was in a nursing home and I guess in your old age, began to recall old things, whereas recent information you gorget, and she started, she hadn't talked a word of Russian in all those years and she suddenly began to sing Russian songs and she was entertaining these people in the nursing home.

DALLETT: So, she never would have taught you any of these songs as children, nothing at all?

MOEL: (His wife speaks off-mike.) Oh yes she did--no well I'm talking about earlier years.

DALLETT: You mentioned one thing about her to do with food in the kitchen, the one thing that she thought was American.

MOEL: Oh, she learned, she learned about French fried potatoes which we never experienced. She learned to make them, I remember she bought the basket, you know, that you dip into the hot, hot fat or Crisco and she would start with the potatoes and we had potatoes, French fries, day after day after day.

DALLETT: That was like her symbol of American food?

MOEL: Yeah.

DALLETT: Okay, I think I've asked you everything that I need to, I want to thank you.

MOEL: I'm looking forward to making a visit, I hope I'm still here (they laugh).

DALLETT: This is the end of Interview Number 133 with Dr. Morris Moel, it's 5:50.