

KECK-135

INGRID AHLFORS

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FINLAND, 1914

AGE 9

PASSAGE ON "THE UNITED STATES"

DALLETT: My name is Nancy Dallett and I'm speaking with Ingrid Ahlfors on Wednesday, February 5, 1986. We are beginning this interview at 12:16 and we're about to interview Mrs. Ahlfors about her immigration experiences from Finland in 1914. This side one of Interview Number 135. Can we start at the beginning of your story and can you tell me where and when you were born?

AHLFORS: I was born in Pori, P-O-R-I, Finland on February 7, 1905.

DALLETT: And what do you remember about life as a young girl in Finland, can you tell me a bit about your family?

AHLFORS: Well, we were poor, otherwise we wouldn't have wanted to immigrate (she laughs).

DALLETT: What did your father do there?

AHLFORS: He worked in the sawmill until he died.

DALLETT: Your father worked in the sawmill. As you were a little girl, do you remember him, going off to work and did you go to school?

AHLFORS: Very little because I was about four years old at the time so I really don't remember. I remember certain little incidents but nothing that, you know.

DALLETT: Okay, uh, did you have brothers and sisters?

AHLFORS: I had one sister and one brother.

DALLETT: Older or--

AHLFORS: I was the middle one.

DALLETT: And did you, what age was it that you went to school?

AHLFORS: Seven.

DALLETT: Do you remember what school was like? Was it a one-room school or was it a large--

AHLFORS: It wasn't a one-room school, no but it wasn't a very large school either but um, I remember a little about it.

DALLETT: Anything that sticks out in your memory, about the house that you lived in? I'm trying to get a picture of what Pori looked like.

AHLFORS: It was a small city with a river going through it, there was a bridge went across from one section to the other and near the bridge there was big church on one side and on the other side there was a cotton mill or whatever, some sort of manufacturing plant and uh--

DALLETT: Was there a forest around? I assume with a sawmill your father worked in--

AHLFORS: That was further down the river, it wasn't near the bridge that I used to cross to go, you know, from one part of the place to

another.

DALLETT: And at that time was there electricity and--

AHLFORS: No, oh no, no. Kerosene lamps, outhouses.

DALLETT: And was it, what kind of streets were there, dirt streets, cobblestones?

AHLFORS: Cobblestones I remember, yes and some were just mud I guess.

DALLETT: Uh-huh and how did people travel, how did they get around?

AHLFORS: Horse.

DALLETT: Horses.

AHLFORS: Uh-huh.

DALLETT: And your mother worked in the home and raised the children and--

AHLFORS: Well after my father died, she had to go to work, she worked in a mill.

DALLETT: Also in a sawmill or--

AHLFORS: No, no, the cotton mill.

DALLETT: Do you remember what she did there? Was she at a loom or--

AHLFORS: No, I don't know, remember that, no.

DALLETT: Do you remember as a little girl, was it unusual for someone to come to America, did you ever know anyone from your town of Pori to come to the States?

AHLFORS: Well, my aunt and uncle had come.

DALLETT: And do you remember what year that was, or how old you might have been, when they came to this country?

AHLFORS: They were here ahead of my mother, that's all I remember,

I don't know exactly how, and also my father's brother and his family were here.

DALLETT: And how was it, did your mother then make the decision on her own to come to this country?

AHLFORS: Yes, yes.

DALLETT: How long after your had died did she decide to come to the States?

AHLFORS: It must have been about, perhaps three years.

DALLETT: Do you remember, did she maybe get letters from, from you aunt saying anything about America that made her think she should think about coming here?

AHLFORS: Well, that I couldn't say. She must have been in contact with the relatives, naturally, but uh, being I was fairly young, I didn't take much notice, no (she laughs).

DALLETT: But what is your first memory of, of uh, that period when you began to make arrangements to come to--

AHLFORS: Well my mother came first, with my sister, and she left my brother and myself with my grandmother. Because she didn't, she didn't think she could take care of three children at once.

DALLETT: And so, I'm sorry, you might have told me this before, how old were you when she left to come to America?

AHLFORS: I was seven.

DALLETT: Do you remember when she left?

AHLFORS: Faintly, yes.

DALLETT: So after that you were brought up by your grandmother, your mother's mother?

AHLFORS: My mother's mother, yes.

DALLETT: And do you remember when, I assume you got a letter or something saying it was time for you then to come to America?

AHLFORS: Well, my aunt who had been here, came back to Finland and

stayed for a few months, just to visit her mother and then I came back with her, I guess my mother had arranged it. But my brother was still left in Finland.

DALLETT: Still with your grandmother?

AHLFORS: Uh-huh.

DALLETT: Okay. Do you remember actually leaving when, that day when you left with your aunt?

AHLFORS: It was snowing, there was a lot of snow on the ground, it was very cold.

DALLETT: Did you have to say goodbye to the other children at school, you were already at school then?

AHLFORS: I was in school but uh, I don't remember saying goodbye.

I must have said something to somebody, they knew that I was leaving but uh, I remember the walk to the railroad station through the snow and the cold.

DALLETT: You said goodbye to your grandmother then, did she come

with you to the station?

AHLFORS: No, she didn't, no.

DALLETT: You had to say goodbye to your brother then?

AHLFORS: Uh-huh.

DALLETT: Uh, do you remember bringing anything with you from home?
Did you pack up a favorite book or--anything like that?

AHLFORS: No, just a few clothes that I had.

DALLETT: Okay, do you remember taking the train then, was it a
train that you walked to?

AHLFORS: Yes, we took a train from Pori to Rauma.

DALLETT: How would you spell that?

AHLFORS: R-A-U-M-A.

DALLETT: Had you ever been on a train before?

AHLFORS: No.

DALLETT: And what happened after that? You took the train to Rauma--

AHLFORS: From Rauma, we took uh, a boat or a ship or whatever it was, a small, actually a freight, a freighter. There were no accommodations for passengers but people were down in the hold, lying down. We were supposed to take off that night when we got to Rauma but there was a blizzard so the captain of the boat said that we would have to wait until morning and we took off in the morning and it was a very stormy passage to Sweden, Stockholm, Sweden. We got to Sweden, sometime after dark, I don't know what time it was, but we were taken to some sort of a tourist hotel, or whatever it was, to sleep overnight. And from Stockholm we took the train to Malmo, Sweden, that's at the southern tip of Sweden.

DALLETT: Can you spell that for me?

AHLFORS: M-A-L-M-O. From there we took a ferry across to Copenhagen, Denmark and Denmark is where we got on board the United States, the liner United States.

DALLETT: Oh, it was called the United States?

AHLFORS: Uh-huh.

DALLETT: So that was a regular passenger ship?

AHLFORS: Yes.

DALLETT: Different from the freighters.

AHLFORS: Oh yes, it was a regular ocean going liner.

DALLETT: When you were on the freighter do you remember where you would have slept? Were you down below on the freighter?

AHLFORS: Well if I had wanted to sleep, I suppose I would have been down in the hold. I looked down there, there were a lot of people lying around but my aunt and I stayed up. In fact when we first went on board, the captain invited us to go into his little cabin to sit down but we weren't there very long when I got seasick so my aunt said, "You can't vomit in here." (She laughs.) So most of the time we were out on deck even though it was very cold.

DALLETT: Tell me, what do you remember about coming over on the United States, what was the passenger liner like?

AHLFORS: Well, we were of course in the steerage, I imagine you would call it. We had a cabin with a bunk, several bunk beds. I don't remember if they were two sets of bunk beds or three. I'm not sure but uh, I guess it was only, it accommodated four. My aunt and I and the other woman and little boy who were traveling at the same time as us.

DALLETT: Did you know them from--

AHLFORS: My aunt knew them.

DALLETT: Were you seasick also on that--yeah.

AHLFORS: I was flat on my back the whole trip. We sailed on the 10th of December and--

DALLETT: And what year was that, sorry--

AHLFORS: 1914.

DALLETT: And how long a voyage was that?

AHLFORS: I think we arrived on the 26th.

DALLETT: So maybe sixteen days.

AHLFORS: (She laughs.) Can I take this off for a minute?

DALLETT: You can. Just tell me about what you have and I'll maybe have a look later.

AHLFORS: I don't know if I know how to explain it, my grandfather's father-in-law is very interested in all sorts of oh, genealogy and whatever and he went to the, I believe it's the National Archives where they have these records. He--

DALLETT: The ship's manifest, does it have your name on it?

AHLFORS: Uh-huh, he sent me a copy of that.

DALLETT: So you know exactly what day you came in then?

AHLFORS; Yes.

DALLETT: And we could look that up later.

AHLFORS: Of course I knew anyway, you know, but this confirms it.

DALLETT: Do you have any memories of that time uh, when your aunt told you what life in the States was going to be like, did she explain how it might be different from--

AHLFORS: No, no.

DALLETT: Nothing, you just knew you were coming to your mother.

AHLFORS: That's all.

DALLETT: Did she, did you know if she had plans to later send for your brother?

AHLFORS: Oh yes, sure.

DALLETT: But she was just bringing one at a time.

AHLFORS: Uh-huh, one at a time, uh-huh.

DALLETT: So then on December 26 you came into Ellis Island.

AHLFORS: Ellis Island, uh-huh.

DALLETT: Tell me what, what do you remember about Ellis Island? Do you remember seeing it for the first time? Did you come in, in the morning?

AHLFORS: Yes, we came in, in the morning, I don't remember a great deal about the outside except it was, you know, a big building. But inside, we were put into a, my aunt and I and this other woman and the little boy, were put into a separate little, like a wire enclosed area. We could see through the wire into the other areas where people were also confined. But for some reason--

DALLETT: The four of you were separated?

AHLFORS: The four of us were separated by ourselves and uh, during the afternoon the children were taken to a sort of play area, it was inside, it wasn't out, it was inside, but there were swings and se-saws and we spent a little time in there. At mealtime the gate was unlocked for us

and we were marched over to the dining area where there were very long tables and benches and the dishes were some sort of metal, I don't know what but--

DALLETT: Do you remember what you ate?

AHLFORS: No, I have no idea (she laughs), as I said, I was hungry. Because I hadn't eaten anything through the whole voyage.

DALLETT: Did you begin to feel better, once you--

AHLFORS: Yes, once I was off the ship, I started to feel better, uh-huh.

DALLETT: Was your aunt also ill from the journey?

AHLFORS: No, she was alright.

DALLETT: Now she was, she had already been in this country for some time?

AHLFORS: Yes, she had.

DALLETT: So she was speaking English?

AHLFORS: Broken, a little bit, you now.

DALLETT: Do you remember at all, the officials asking any questions about ho you were?

AHLFORS: No, no. Whatever they asked, they asked my aunt, I guess because I wasn't asked anything special.

DALLETT: Did you have to go through a medical examination? Did they examine you there?

AHLFORS: They must have because it's on that chart that I have, there's some mention of, you know, any disabilities, or any this or any of that, so there must have been some sort of physical.

DALLETT: You don't actually remember the doctors checking your eyes or--

AHLFORS: Oh I'm sure everybody's eyes were checked because that was something they were fussy about.

DALLETT: Okay, then you said, you explained what happened in the
 mealtime, how about, when was, what happened in the
 afternoon, or do you remember what happened in the
 evening?

AHLFORS: One evening we were taken to some sort of a theater,
right in the same building and we were shown a movie but what that was about
I have no idea because I was too tired to care much.

DALLETT: And now this was the first day you were there?

AHLFORS: I'm not sure if it was the first night or the second
night that we were shown the movie.

DALLETT: Do you have any idea why you had to spend the night or to
 spend two nights?

AHLFORS: Because my mother had to pick me up.

DALLETT: Okay, and where was she coming from?

AHLFORS: Fitchburg, Massachusetts.

DALLETT: Fitchburg. So you couldn't just get off the Island with your aunt?

AHLFORS: No, no, my mother had to claim me.

DALLETT: Do you remember the room where you slept at Ellis Island, was it in that, what you called the cage?

AHLFORS: Oh no, we were taken upstairs, it was closed-in room, door was locked on us and we were put in there. They had the metal springs that sort of hang from the cei, well they were on posts between the ceiling and the floor and they were in layers. I don't remember if they were two or three layers but anyway there was nothing on them, they were just the metal springs, that first night. And we spread our coats and dresses so we wouldn't be too uncomfortable.

DALLETT: Sounds pretty rough?

AHLFORS: (She laughs.) Well I lived through it.

DALLETT: So, there were blankets though?

AHLFORS: The second night we had blankets because my aunt complained.

DALLETT: I'm sorry, did you say it was just the four of you , again in the room?

AHLFORS: No, there was a Belgian woman in there with, I'm not sure if she had two or three children and she had been in there, I don't know how long, but before we were there and uh, how long after us she stayed, I have no Idea. But she was waiting for her husband to come and claim her because a woman alone with children can't come in, in fact my mother could not come in with my sister, my mother came a month ahead of my sister. My aunt and uncle followed, with my sister.

DALLETT: Oh, but your mother was able to come in on her own--

AHLFORS: On her own as long as you have twenty-five dollars or whatever it was they needed to show. And at that time there was great need for immigrants because the factories needed help so they could absorb all the help they could get.

DALLETT: Which kind of factories were the immigrants getting work in? In Massachusetts.

AHLFORS: Yes, they were mills, uh, cotton mills and woolen mills, paper mills, and Eiwood (?) Johnson, I believe they made bicycles.

DALLETT: So, I'm not sure if I asked you this before but uh, was it common then for people from your town, Pori, to immigrate to America and go to Massachusetts, were there a lot of people--

AHLFORS: Fitchburg had a regular area where everything was Finnish so that's why so many of them went to Fitchburg. There was plenty of work there and you didn't need to speak English to get along.

DALLETT: Do you remember the day that you were released from Ellis Island, and your mother, did she come and pick you up there?

AHLFORS: Uh-huh, well, we were taken by boat to New York and from there by subway to Grand Central and then put on a train.

DALLETT: So you were riding your first subway then?

AHLFORS: Uh-huh.

DALLETT: What did you think?

AHLFORS: I don't know, I guess I didn't think too much, everything was different, you know.

DALLETT: Sounds like you were pretty much taking it in stride.

AHLFORS: Right, right.

DALLETT: And then you went to Grand Central Station, took a train to Fitchburg?

AHLFORS: Well it didn't go direct to Fitchburg, I think we had to change at Wooster or wherever it was that we had to change trains but we finally got to Fitchburg.

DALLETT: And your mother had an apartment there?

AHLFORS: Uh-huh.

DALLETT: Was she living by herself there?

AHLFORS: With my sister.

DALLETT: With your sister.

AHLFORS: Uh-huh.

DALLETT: And was your mother already picking up English or was she was with people that felt she didn't--

AHLFORS: Well, she hadn't picked up too much but she did understand and you know, say a little bit.

DALLETT: And your sister, had she been enrolled in school or--

AHLFORS: My sister had been going to school, yes.

DALLETT: So she must have been picking up some English.

AHLFORS: Oh yes, oh yes, well she spoke fairly well by then, children learn fast.

DALLETT: And tell me what it was like when you, how soon after that did you, I assume you were enrolled in school? Did you go to school?

AHLFORS: Oh yes. I started school right after January 1, once school started.

DALLETT: And you started picking up the language?

AHLFORS: Well, I guess I did. I was put into an ungraded room, so many immigrants were coming in at that time, into Fitchburg that they were several different nationalities.

DALLETT: Which ones? Do you remember, besides the Finnish people? Which other nationalities?

AHLFORS: Uh, I believe there was some French speaking, a boy from Turkey and a couple of Swedish people, kids, we were all different ages because you know, whoever came in and couldn't speak English was put into this same room.

DALLETT: And what language did the teacher speak?

AHLFORS: Oh she spoke English.

DALLETT: Just English.

AHLFORS: That's all.

DALLETT: So you had to start--

AHLFORS: We had to start learning (she laughs).

DALLETT: And do you have any impressions, do you still remember some of the things that seemed strange to you as a young girl, here you had made this big move from your village in Finland to Fitchburg, was life very different or did you find that--

AHLFORS: No, except for the language barrier of course but other than that, why, I felt at home.

DALLETT: You did?

AHLFORS: Yeah.

DALLETT: A change in weather or food?

AHLFORS: Well the winters are pretty severe in Massachusetts. We had a lot of snow, so--

DALLETT: You were used to that?

AHLFORS: I was used to that.

DALLETT: How about the food, did you find new foods or did your mother pretty much continue to feed you what you were used to?

AHLFORS: Well, of course the food was more varied, I mean, I had never seen tomatoes for instance in Finland or bananas, things like that. But my mother fairly well stuck to the old food. Beef stew or lamb stew or pork chops or things of that sort.

DALLETT: And then how long after you arrived, did your brother come?

AHLFORS: It must have been a little over two years.

DALLETT: And your grandmother, did she also come?

AHLFORS: Oh no, no, she never had any intention of coming.

DALLETT: Anyone else from Pori, did they come later to Fitchburg that you knew as a little girl, in Finland?

AHLFORS: No, no.

DALLETT: Did you ever go back for a visit?

AHLFORS: No, no, I never did, no. My husband and I had planned on going after he retired but he was just sixty-one when he died so he never got a chance to retire and then I never went back.

DALLETT: And as you grow older, as you grew older did you continue to, uh, did you only speak English after awhile or did you continue to speak --

AHLFORS: Well, with my mother I usually spoke Finnish because she preferred that but other than that why--

DALLETT: Did you teach your children some Finnish?

AHLFORS: I started to with my oldest daughter but uh, people kept telling me, "Oh she'll be confused." So I gave it up.

DALLETT: Was your husband also Finnish?

AHLFORS: Yes, uh-huh.

DALLETT: And when did he come to this country?

AHLFORS: I had the, it could have been 1912, I'm not sure. I had that photostat too with the record.

DALLETT: Okay so, that's one question I wanted to ask you was what kind of papers do you have? You mentioned that you had a photostat of the ship's manifest.

AHLFORS: Ships's manifest, yes.

DALLETT: Do you have your passport? Or passport photo or anything like that?

AHLFORS: No, I don't.

DALLETT: Anything from the ships you were on that trip?

AHLFORS: No.

DALLETT: How about, when did you become a citizen?

AHLFORS: I guess it must have been early 1940.

DALLETT: Do you have those papers, your citizenship papers?

AHLFORS: Yes.

DALLETT: You do have those?

AHLFORS: Oh yes, yeah.

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

AHLFORS: No, I can't think of anything.

DALLETT; Okay, thank you very much.

AHLFORS: Thank you.

DALLETT: This is the end of Interview Number 135 with Ingrid Ahlfors and it is 12:57.