

KECK-151

BESSIE COHEN AKAWIE

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THE UKRAINE, 1921

AGE 11

PASSAGE ON "THE ZEELAND"

APPLEBOME: This is Edward Applebome, and I'm speaking with Mrs. Bessie Akawie on Friday, February 7, 1986. We are beginning this interview at about 10:40 in the morning. We are about to interview Mrs. Akawie about her immigration experience from the Ukraine in 1921. Okay, Mrs. Akawie, can you tell me what your maiden name is and where and when you were born.

AKAWIE: Bessie Cohen. I was born in Krasna, March 12, 1910.

APPLEBOME: Okay, and spell the name of the town for us.

AKAWIE: K-R-A-S-N-A.

APPLEBOME: And that was in the Ukraine.

AKAWIE: Right.

APPLEBOME: What was it like in Krasna? Tell me a little bit about your family history, what kind of work your family did, what you remember about growing up in that town.

AKAWIE: Well, my father was a farmer and, he had a partner and they, planted beets. And, uh, I remember as a child that this was my father's work.

APPLEBOME: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

AKAWIE: We were, my mother originally had nine children, but you never expected all the children to survive, like one was a twin.

APPLEBOME: Where did you fit into the order of the children?

AKAWIE: Well, six remained, and I was the, uh, let's see, Rachel, Sophie, Ben, I was the fourth one.

APPLEBOME: The fourth. And what did you children do there?

AKAWIE: We used to play and, uh, we never had toys, but my older sister made up little things for me. She made up dolls and we used to use the cornsilk from the corn on the cob and make hair for the dolls with that. And, picked up little stones and, uh, just skipped, no, we didn't skip rope, but we skipped around. And whenever it rained we'd run out in the rain to get wet. We liked that.

APPLEBOME: (He laughs.) That was a good game, huh.

AKAWIE: And we'd also go swimming in a little pond. But when, uh, some boys would pass by and know we were Jewish kids they would throw mud at us, so that didn't last very long. But I remember it very well.

APPLEBOME: Was it mostly a Jewish town that you lived in?

AKAWIE: Yes. Most of the people, there were about seven or eight hundred inhabitants that were almost all Jewish.

APPLEBOME: And were they mostly farmers?

AKAWIE: No. There was one, uh, was, had a market, like a

little grocery store. One had a men's shop, little stores.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember going to market with your mother?

AKAWIE: No, not really, because the marketplace--. I have a picture of the marketplace, by the way. I would go with my mother sometimes, but you didn't shop very much. You planted a lot of your stuff, like carrots and potatoes. These, and cabbage, these are the, uh, vegetables that I remember.

APPLEBOME: And you had relatives that lived in the town also, correct?

AKAWIE: Well, my maternal grandmother had died before I was born. I was named after her. But my father's parents, my father's parents lived near us, and we'd see them on Jewish holidays. That was the rare--. But my grandfather, my mother's father, lived next door to us. But he was an invalid all the time that I knew him. He had rheumatism very badly. And I, when he died, we weren't permitted to go over there, but I could peek out the window, and I could see the candles at his head when he was lying there.

APPLEBOME: And tell me a little bit about schooling in your

village.

AKAWIE: Well, we weren't permitted to go to the public school.

But we were fortunate enough that my parents could afford a private teacher. So we had a teacher who taught us Hebrew and, uh, Russian and arithmetic.

APPLEBOME: This was just for the children in your family?

AKAWIE: Just our, just our kids. My brother used to go to cheder, but the girls, my parents believed that the girls should also study, which was not the case.

APPLEBOME: You're okay. and you told me that your father had, and the progressive role in the household, right?

AKAWIE: My father was very unusual because he did, uh, help my mother with the housework. He'd put the bread into the hearth, take it out, and then he'd help sweep and he washed the kitchen floor. Well, there was no floor. It was an earthen floor, but he'd clean it.

APPLEBOME: And there was the story about the dowry?

AKAWIE: Oh, he returned it, which was very unusual for his time. It's many years ago. And, uh, he was crazy about my mother, and she always used to talk about it.

APPLEBOME: Why do you think he returned the dowry?

AKAWIE: Because he was progressive thinking. He didn't believe that he should pay for getting my mother, that he should be paid. So he returned it. It was six hundred rubles. And, uh, my mother always talked about it, so we knew. And, uh, my older sister, when she was eleven, went to work in a photographer's studio across the street. But i, she would always take me to the river where we'd wash clothes, and I would watch her do it. Because you couldn't, you had to buy water, so they'd wash the, with the hot water at home, and then rinse it at the river.

APPLEBOME: And you would play behind the photography store, you've told me.

AKAWIE: Oh, I picked up, oh, you remember it so well. I used to, we used to take the glass, those were our toys, and we'd rip off the,

uh, film, and we used to play with the glass. We were always happy when they broke a dish, so we could have something to play with.

APPLEBOME: (He laughs.) That's very funny. What would you do with the glass?

AKAWIE: We had a certain game that we would, uh, put little, like, we would think they were little rocks. And then we would, uh, make a little hole in the ground and, uh, imprison a fly. That was a mean thing to do. (She laughs.) But we did it.

APPLEBOME: Now, tell me the background of your father coming to the United States. How old were you?

AKAWIE: My father went, I was about three or four, and I remember that very well. The, uh, there was a sudden snow storm and it, uh, the plants, all the beets were frozen. And he and his partner lost everything. So they borrowed money and they went to this country, and my father became a furrier. What's interesting is that my husband was a furrier, too.

APPLEBOME: Had he been planning to come to this country anyway?

AKAWIE: No, not at all. He was only going because there was no way to earn a living after that.

APPLEBOME: His whole crop was wiped out.

AKAWIE: That's right. See, most people, there was a, uh, tailor, there was a, a, shoemaker. There were the, that's how people made a living. But my father didn't have that. He was always like farming.

APPLEBOME: Was it unusual for a Jewish man to be a farmer?

AKAWIE: Yes, it was, because they didn't allow that very much, but this was a Jewish town. And he dealt with, uh, non-Jewish people in the farming area.

APPLEBOME: Did he own his land?

AKAWIE: You know, this part I really don't know. If he owned it he wouldn't have lost it. I guess he didn't own it. No, he rented it. There was a way of doing that, I don't know how.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember if there were laborers that worked for him?

AKAWIE: No. I was very young. But after he left, my mother was a very, uh, she wasn't going to to let here kids go hungry, so she would leave town and buy toys and bring it back, she'd go to big cities and, uh, bring them home.

APPLEBOME: Tell me what you remember about the day your father left?

AKAWIE: Oh, the whole, it looked like the whole town came. And we were put to bed, but I wasn't going to go to sleep. And they sat on the bed. And there was one bedroom, and there were two beds in there. We had one, and my mother and father had to other.

APPLEBOME: How many children slept on the bed that you were in?

AKAWIE: Oh, four of us. And, uh, even in this country three of us slept in the bed when we first came her. But, where was I? About father leaving?

APPLEBOME: The day your father left.

AKAWIE: So, but I remember very distinctly that when the Rabbi would come to teach my brother, besides cheder he also had a private tutor, he picked, put his hand up, and I remember his white shirt showing, and my father said he wasn't going to study that night, and he put the sidur back. You know what a sidur means?

APPLEBOME: No, tell me.

AKAWIE: It's, uh, Hebrew and a, religious book. So he put it back, and then everybody sat around on the bed talking. And I stayed up. I heard quite a lot of it. And then I must have fallen asleep because I don't remember the morning my father left.

APPLEBOME: Did you understand, at the time, what it meant that he was leaving for the United States?

AKAWIE: Oh, sure. Sure. We knew that this was the Golden Medina and they were going to, uh, earn some money. What we didn't know was that the War would break out, and my father wouldn't come back. And he was here for seven years.

APPLEBOME: So how did your family get along after he had left?

AKAWIE: My mother earned a living. She, the biggest thing she did was make whiskey, which was against the law. And we were always scared, and we all took turns. We didn't have a, uh, thermometer for the whiskey to measure the strength, so we all took turns, all the children. And one night, when my brother and his friend stayed, uh, stayed up, they would have to stay up all night. When it got very weak, then we would stop the, uh, the machinery, whatever it was.

APPLEBOME: Where would she make the whiskey?

AKAWIE: In the bedroom. We, by this time, we had already moved to my grandfather's house. Remember she broke the lock and moved in?

APPLEBOME: You have to tell us that story. Okay, you can tell the story now. That's a great story.

AKAWIE: Well, when our little house was getting to be very shabby and very old and we were always cold, and my uncle had inherited my grandfather's house when he died. But he was too selfish to let us move in. So when he was out of town my mother said, "Come on, kids. We're going to

get in there." And she picked up a little rock and broke the lock, and I can see her doing it now. And we moved in. And when my, uh, uncle came there was nothing you could do about it. He stayed in the cold living room. It was a beautiful house and, uh, we had the bedroom, all of us.

APPLEBOME: Tell me what the house looked like.

AKAWIE: Oh, it was a beautiful house. It was, uh, had a front porch and the front room was once a grocery store that my grandfather had owned. And then there was a big living room and the room that was celebrated for Sukkoth. That's the holiday that you stay outside, it's the planting and stuff. So, uh, I don't know why I'm so nervous. You're such a nice fellow. Why am I so nervous? (She laughs.)

APPLEBOME: You're doing fine. You're doing fine.

AKAWIE: Anyway, there was a ceiling in that room that would open--

APPLEBOME: Go ahead.

AKAWIE: I don't know what my mother did, but she had a certain way of opening it so that we would celebrate Sukkoth in that particular

room. Then there was one room that was the bedroom and we all slept there. My mother slept in the closet, one of these big, uh, wooden closets. My mother made a bed for him on the floor in the closet. My sister, uh, Ruchel, my oldest one and I, would sleep in one bed, and my mother slept with the other kids in another bed.

APPLEBOME: Did your uncle have a wife and family?

AKAWIE: No. He never married until we, years, years later we heard, my mother had written to him, and he said he got married.

APPLEBOME: What did your uncle say when you had moved into the house while he was away?

AKAWIE: He was angry as anything. And then, there was still some food in the grocery part of the house, and he wouldn't let us take anything. And one time my sister Ruchel took out a herring, and he, he was going to, she saw him running after her, so she ran and she dropped it in the ground, and picked it up, and we washed it, and we ate it. (They laugh.)

APPLEBOME: What happened to the old house that you had moved from?

AKAWIE: Oh, it because a, uh, we used to keep, uh, wood and, uh, sphagnum, that means, I really don't know what the English word for that is. But whenever the pogroms would come we would hide in there. And my uncle was so, uh, to prove how selfish he was, he hid a better place, more of a hiding place than us and he told my mother that if we're caught not to give him away.

APPLEBOME: Where was this place that you would hide?

AKAWIE: That was, in that little house that we owned once.

APPLEBOME: Where in the house?

AKAWIE: We would, it was so covered with wooden things that we would just sleep on the ground until they--. But the, across the street from us was a public school I wrote about. And, uh, these were Gentiles, and they weren't permitted to have us come, you know, have my sister go to school there. Ruchel was old enough to,--. But they took care of us. They hid us. They made a hole in the ground and we would hide in there. And, uh, they fed us. We, sometimes we'd be there for three or four days. And that was the end of that.

APPLEBOME: How would you know that there were soldiers coming that

you need to hid, hide from?

AKAWIE: Oh, well, one time I wrote about the time that my mother, we, oh, my uncle had built a little hiding place in the house, If I could describe it. He took one of the big rooms, and he added a little wall like three feet wide. And it was completely sealed, and nobody could tell that there was a room there. It wasn't really a room, it was just enough for us to squeeze into. And the, uh, the entrance and the exit was under the hearth in the kitchen. It was quite a big kitchen, I remember. And we would crawl out on our bellies. So one time we were hiding in there, you would know that there was a pogrom coming. They would, first of all, some of the non-Jewish would tell us, who liked us, who weren't anti-Semitic. So we were hiding in there and then my mother said that she felt that if we ever got caught in there we wouldn't get a Jewish burial. So she told us to come out. So we crawled out, and as we came out of the house, two of the, two soldiers ran after her and they yelled "Stoy," means stop. (She whispers.) I'm so nervous.

APPLEBOME: You're doing very well. I think we can continue.

AKAWIE: Are other people nervous when they're interviewed?

APPLEBOME: Everybody's nervous. But not everybody has as good a

story to tell as you do.

AKAWIE: Anyway, we, she grabbed a hold of us and we all ran to the, to the long, it was called the Long Gas, it means the long, narrow street. And we sat out there. And she showed that she wasn't going to be afraid. She was a very unusual woman.

APPLEBOME: This is your sister, now?

AKAWIE: My mother.

APPLEBOME: Oh, your mother. Excuse me.

AKAWIE: But my sister, the oldest one, who was really like another mother to me, she ran in the opposite direction and, uh, she witnessed the rape. And, uh, after it was getting, after a few hours, my mother said, "Let's go to our neighbor's house." He was an old man with a long beard, and his daughter, who lived there. And, uh, we came to stay with them, we didn't want to be alone. So they, one of the, Petlura's army's guys, you know he was killed by a Jew in Paris, he did a lot of damage. He walked in, and I can still remember. And he had leather leggings and he had a little whip and, uh, he really chased a girl that was coming, that came into hiding. She ran up in the attic, but he grabbed her

and he got her out and my uncle told us that he saw them rape her. And there was, I mean, we were little children, but we understood what rape meant. and we knew how terrible it was. I remember one little girl who was, people would look down on her after she was raped, after kids were raped. and she stood with her arms folded to defy people and, uh, that wasn't her fault.

APPLEBOME: That's terrible.

AKAWIE: Yeah.

APPLEBOME: And the armies would move in and out of your town?

AKAWIE: Yeah. The, uh, the army that I remember the most were the Austrians that, uh, got typhus. We got typhus too, I wrote about that. But, anyway, these guys would die every single day. We'd run over to the, near the church, where they would roll them down on a board into the, uh, basement. And some of them were still alive, but they didn't know what to do with them. And, uh, hundreds of them died and then we finally caught it, too.

APPLEBOME: These were men who were killed fighting with the Bolshevik Army, or--

AKAWIE: No, these were, uh, yeah, they were fighting in the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks were, at that time, were very good to us, because when they came we could open our doors and we could walk down the street and they trained us. We were, my brother was the, uh, Red Army, a red Army, uh, nurse. He carried--. This was all in play. He carried some bandages and, uh, we would parade around, and they were very nice to us. They were very idealistic. We didn't know that Stalin felt the way he did about Jews. (She laughs.) But we didn't even know about Stalin then. We knew about, uh, Trotsky and Lenin. These were the two main--. And I remember a newspaper clipping my mother hung up in the kitchen, and it showed a picture of Lenin and Trotsky. I still have a picture of it in my mind. (She laughs.) (Refers to sound engineer.) He's writing--

APPLEBOME: He's just taking a few notes. It's okay.

AKAWIE: Oh.

APPLEBOME: So what were you hearing from your father during this period?

AKAWIE: Oh. Well, all of, my father always wrote that he wanted to come back. Because in a small town, with the pogroms and all

that, you still had a very, a ghetto is a very comfortable place to be in when there are so many enemies around. So by that time we went to, there was a synagogue. I remember it. And, uh, I remember some of the, uh, Jewish boys who would smoke on Saturday when the Jews went, as a defiance. But, uh, then the War broke out, and no letters came through. That's when my mother went to work, and, because money was coming in until then. So many, many years, and then, had gone by, and my father couldn't come home.

APPLEBOME: Had he been writing to you?

AKAWIE: Yes, and he sent money. But then when the war broke out, after 1914, '13, nothing came through. That's when my mother decided to earn a living making whiskey. We had, the whiskey, they called it zatur, they had a big barrel, and she made out of corn, molasses, and during the night we'd take a sneak look to see if it was, uh, working. They called it, uh, peshpilt, or something. And I remember I put my hand and a little mouse scratched my palm, and I've been afraid of mice ever since.

APPLEBOME: There was a mouse in the whiskey?

AKAWIE: There was a mouse in the, uh, in the covers.

APPLEBOME: Did you ever take a sip of the whiskey yourself?

AKAWIE: Oh, that's what I set out to tell you before about my brother and his friend. His friend started to drink more than he should have, and he didn't come home. So his father came. That's another story. His father used to make false money under the, uh, Czar. And I remember that he was caught and he was beaten and he fell and he broke his leg and they put him in prison. He was in prison for many, many years. And when the Bolsheviks took power, they released him because they considered him a political prisoner. Anyway, Alex, my brother's friend, drank so much that he just passed out, so his father came with, he carried, he always used a cane because he had broken his leg, and he beat him. I remember he was really beating him like crazy. But alex never woke up for two days. (She laughs.)

APPLEBOME: Who would your mother sell the whiskey to?

AKAWIE: To the, uh, peasants. They all knew about it, and they would come. But we were always afraid they'd give us away. and some of them, once in a while, did. So she paid off the, uh, she paid chabar, what's the

English word for, uh, when you--

APPLEBOME: Was it like a bribe she paid?

AKAWIE: A bribe. That's chabar. I still remember the word.
(She laughs.) Yeah, I was, she paid them off, and then they wouldn't give her, you know, sell her out. But that's what she earned a living from. She never touched it though.

APPLEBOME: An age old profession, right?

AKAWIE: Yeah.

APPLEBOME: So let's get, now, to the part where your family was going to leave.

AKAWIE: Oh, so one day my mother decided, when we didn't hear from my father, and if a letter came the whole town would come and read over our shoulder. But no letter came and she picked up, sold everything we owned, she had some nice jewelry my father had given her. I still remember a bracelet and a brooch that he gave her. So she sold everything except one big pillow. We schlepped that and dragged it all over the United States.
(She laughs.) I mean, all over the country, the, Europe, to come here. And

when we got to, uh, Bessarabia my mother finally contacted my father and he knew we were coming. And he was very, he was very delighted even though he wanted to come home. and, uh, he always sent different men to look for us. That was the, uh, the idea was to send someone, they called him a delegate.

APPLEBOME: Spell that word for me.

AKAWIE: Delegate to, uh, there was one named Mr. Cohen. My father gave him a hundred dollars to find us. Then there was a Mr. Dubin--

APPLEBOME: Did he give that money to your family, or that was--

AKAWIE: Yeah. To give my, part of it to the family, then part we paid him. Then there was a Mr. Dubin who was very homely looking, and he was the nicest man. He gave us fifty dollars. And then the third delegate was my cousin, who is featured in my story a lot. Because when I, we saw him brushing his teeth we got so excited that my mother went out and got a family toothbrush. We all took turns.

APPLEBOME: You had never seen anybody brush their teeth before then?

AKAWIE: No. In Krasna we didn't have that. I didn't even know if it was in existence at all when we were little kids. Any way we came, we got started, a trip of two years. We were in Bessarabia for six months. My mother had to send each kid to a different house because nobody would rent to a woman with six children. But one old man, an old couple, they were just marvelous. They rented it to us. Because my older sister was going to another city to work as a photographer. And he, so my mother said she had five children. And he thought she lied about the, the number of kids because she needed a place, so he rented it. And we had a very happy relationship. His name was Yossel, Joseph. and we used to sing lullabies to him every night, stroke his beard and uh, the first hot meal we had in many months was what his wife made for us.

APPLEBOME: Why did it take you two years to travel to and exit port?

AKAWIE: Because of the papers and the, uh, it took a long time for everything to go through, the passports and stuff like that. We were in

Bessarabia for six months, we were in Roumania for many, many months.

Roumania was a very, we used to go to the, uh, museum every Sunday.

APPLEBOME: Were you able to cross the borders legally?

AKAWIE: Oh, no. That was a big part of it. I'm glad you asked me that. My uncle hired, uh, two young men to see us across the border. That was the Dnester River that was featured a lot during the, uh, war with Hitler, during the Second World War. And, uh, we got into a rowboat and they, they took us across and they were smuggling sugar out from Russia, at the time, which was really a terrible thing, but we weren't aware of it. And they turned out to be, they remind me of the, uh, people who are bringing Mexicans over now, because they would stop every few miles and demand more money. Because my father, my uncle had given them a certain amount, he and my mother. But she had sewn some money into her underwear, and that was the only money we were left with. And, uh, we were scared that they would kill us, because they did. A lot of people were killed if they didn't come through. Then, when we crossed the, uh, the Dnester. the Dnester River to

Zguritza, a little town in Bessarabia, that was a Jewish town, we didn't know how close we were to the synagogue where we'd get refuge. So two men came out of the building. It was the only building on that whole stretch of land, and started to talk to the driver. We were in a, in a, uh, in a wagon with a, uh, with these two men, stopped. And my mother was scared that they were going to demand more money or kill us, so she grabbed, she ripped her, some of the money out of the underwear and [aid them. And then, just as we went around the bend, it was the Jewish Center. And these people took us to the synagogue and they covered us with blankets and gave us food to eat, and we were there for quite a while. I don't remember how long. But then my mother had to find a place. And she did. And I went to work with my brother in the tobacco fields before we moved in with that old couple. And. uh, I remember they, they thought I was very smart as a kid. (She laughs.) Because they let me get up at three in the morning and go with them because they liked to hear me sing and we talked. I smoked since then so I didn't, I lost my voice, and I can't sing any more. But I used to. We used to sing all over Europe.

And, uh--

APPLEBOME: We're going to just take a break now and flip the tape.

AKAWIE: You never had your coffee. Would you like some hot coffee?

APPLEBOME: It's okay. This is the end of side one of tape one of the interview with Mrs. Bessie Akawie.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

APPLEBOME: This is the start of sid two of tape one of the interview with Mrs. Bessie Akawie. We were up to the point where you and your brother were working in the tobacco fields.

AKAWIE: Yeah. Next door to this old couple that we lived with was a family that owned a tobacco field. So they gave me and my brother a job and, uh, they would let me, after they knew me a while, they would let me go with them at three in the morning, or four in the morning, I remember

the sun was coming out, and then on the, when we were riding in the wagon, we would sing. And when we got to the field--

APPLEBOME: What songs would you sing?

AKAWIE: They were mostly little Russian lullabies.

APPLEBOME: Could you sing one of them now?

AKAWIE: Oh, I couldn't.

APPLEBOME: Just sing me one verse. It would be okay.

AKAWIE: I can't remember. Maybe later on.

APPLEBOME: Okay. Maybe later.

AKAWIE: Uh, we would, uh, string up the tobacco leaves. We would pick them and string them up and then hang them up to dry. And they fed us, and I don't remember if we got any money or not. But many, many years later, when we were growing up, some of the guys, the sons of, two of the sons of these, this family, came to the United States. The younger one was someone I thought I was in love with when I was, was eleven. And when

he came here, I wondered why. (She laughs.) We were all grown up then.

APPLEBOME: Now, what port do we finally travel to when you traveled to the United States?

AKAWIE: We were in Zguritza, which is Bessarabia, and then we went to Bucharest, Roumania. That's where the passport was taken. From there I don't remember how we fit into Czechoslovakia, because we were there for many months. I don't know how the map, my husband should be here, he would tell me. And, uh, then from, uh, Roumania we went to Antwerp. That was my favorite city of all. First time I had ice cream. We used to hear about ice cream. Sacharina moroch they called it. But we never had even seen it. But we, uh, when we got to Antwerp I remember the first ice cream my mother bought us, and we were just thrilled. And I can still smell an orange when I go into the market, because that's when we saw the first orange, was in Antwerp.

APPLEBOME: How long did you stay there for?

AKAWIE: We were there for many, many moths. Four, five months.

APPLEBOME: I don't understand why you didn't board a boat immediately? Was there a complication?

AKAWIE: Yeah. A complication because of papers. Everything was kind of, we had to wait to be legally admitted to this country. So my, there were, uh, legal papers to be filled and then when we were in Europe it was very difficult to even get papers. My mother had to travel to different cities and, uh, did you ever hear the story of Shtetl Beltz?

APPLEBOME: Tell me.

AKAWIE: Gee, we have it on a record here, but I--. Well, this was, it's a nice folk song and my mother went to that city to get the, uh, passports, when we were in Bessarabia. It's, uh, it's featured in Jewish folklore a lot. (Sings a line of the song in Yiddish.) That's all I know. (She laughs.)

APPLEBOME: While you were in Antwerp waiting to leave, did your family work?

AKAWIE: No. We were getting money from my father.

APPLEBOME: Oh. So you were still corresponding with him during those two years.

AKAWIE: Oh, yes. At that, when my father heard that we were coming, then money starts flowing. And, uh, he sent us money to Antwerp, especially, and my sister took us shopping and I can still remember I had a red knit dress, and my two younger sisters, one had a green and one had a blue. And we were, and she got us raincoats and little round hats, little blue hats. And, uh, we went to the, and my mother also treated us to big ball, a big, like a basketball. And, uh, we went, we used to go to play in the, uh, it was green field, like. Oh, I think I turned the coffee on and it's still burning. (Another voice speaks.) (She laughs.)

APPLEBOME: Let's get to the point where you finally--. It's okay.
Let's discuss now the boat trip over. Do you remember the name of the boat?

AKAWIE: The New Zealand [sic, Zeeland]. Uh, but, uh, I wanted to finish with the ball that we went playing with the ball and I rolled it down to the port where the boat was, the boats were leaving from. And when the ball fell into the water I ran to get it, I fell in, and I almost drowned. and some of the, some, some boys came by and they took the raincoat and dragged the ball, took me out and then dragged the ball in, but it was never any good any more after

that. And that was quite an experience. I got my
dress all wet and my sister Ruchel put me into bed
to keep my mother from finding out.

APPLEBOME: Did she find out?

AKAWIE: She did, finally, but she never punished us. They
were, both my parents were never, uh, they never hit us, which was really
the style. If you didn't drink your milk, you got hit. If you did
something bad, you got hit. But, uh, my parents never did that. My father
was a very unusual guy.

APPLEBOME: The boat trip over.

AKAWIE: Oh. Then finally the day arrived. We lived in a very
nice house, by the way, at that time. and, uh, we got on the boat and we
were going second class, which, my father came over steerage. It was the
most terrible way to come. But second class was very nice. It was almost
as good as first. And we had, uh, four o'clock tea. I wonder why, it
wasn't an English boat, it was a german boat, I think. I don't remember.
anyway, I had a wonderful time on the boat. I had one little book that I
wrote about, and it was about a king and an eagle. And I had the upper
berth in the, uh boat, and I would read the same book for ten days. And I

loved the food. I just ate all the time.

APPLEBOME: What food did they serve?

AKAWIE: They served, uh, I remember the first breakfast my, uh, my, the delegate my father sent to us, my cousin, his whole family came across, my aunt, and all her sons. And one of the sons wanted to show off that he could read the menu. So he ordered bacon and eggs. And this aunt, my aunt almost killed him because it was so non-Kosher. But we had nice food. We had chicken and meat--. The people who befriended me were the nurses and the sailors, and they let me stay up half the night when they had, you know, the night before you, you, uh, arrive you have a boat party. And they let me stay. And I remember them picking me up, one of the sailors picked me up and sat me down and gave me an ice cream cone and, uh, I was an old hat at that. I had already eaten ice cream. And, uh, when the morning arrived and we saw the Statue of Liberty, this is something that's very difficult to describe. I get very emotional. I had them all over the house. And, uh, my mother put us on the bench. We started to sing.

You remember that part?

APPLEBOME: What song did you sing?

AKAWIE: We sang-- (She laughs.) It's a joke. We thought we learned an English song, because my cousin David had taught it to us, and this is how it went. (Sings two lines of a song in Yiddish.) It's all in Yiddish. (Sings more of the song.) That was the, the one English word that it had. And we sang the song and everybody was listening to us, and I remember we were all size placed, the four of us, my mother and my two younger sisters and I. And then when--

APPLEBOME: What does the song mean?

AKAWIE: It means America I'm very happy for you and you, uh, I have nothing against you, and you, Columbus, surely not. We were so happy to see the, uh, I don't know if we heard about the Statue of Liberty, or just seeing it got us so excited. But hen the, uh, doctors examined us and didn't let us come on, and, uh, my mother was, waited for us for three months.

APPLEBOME: Let's tell the story now. You get to New York Harbor and you saw the Statue of Liberty--

AKAWIE: And we sang the song. And--

APPLEBOME: And then what happened?

AKAWIE: Then we were taken into what looked like a cage. If you see old pictures of Ellis Island, of that period, they were like, you were like cages around. In fact, they had something on TV a few months ago on Ellis Island. They showed the old cages. And the doctors examined us, and they didn't let, we had typhus and we had to have--. That came from lice. So, uh, our scalps had not been completely, uh, cured. My mother used to put salve on and stuff like that, but it didn't do very well. My brother, especially was in bad shape. But they, uh, he got out very soon after that. It was very, like, matured. Anyway, they kept me in Ellis Island for all these eight months. And, uh, I was befriended by a nurse, Miss Hannah. She lived a block away from there, I realize now. She was so good to me, and she taught me English. By the time I got to New York I knew how to speak, and she taught me, from magazines, she showed me a little bird and--

APPLEBOME: And why were you held for eight months?

AKAWIE: Because of my scalp and, uh, it just wouldn't heal.

And I got very friendly with the lab technician because they let me wash, I'd help, wash glasses and stuff. And I learned to read the words positive and negative. And I knew negative was a good word, and I didn't know why. And positive was no good. And he let me look through the, uh, microscope one time and I could see the crawling of the little things, little microbes, whatever. And, uh, Miss Hannah, oh, she was so good. She was a nurse that you can dream about. She'd always bring me a present from New York City when she'd come. She would be off Sundays. I had a doll and I had some leather gloves and I kept them for many years. And, uh, she would sneak me into the medicine room and pile up a lot of that, and it's on that picture with the bandages. And, uh, it took all those months. And when I was finally ready, we were ready to leave, my little sister and I--

APPLEBOME: During those months, where did you stay?

AKAWIE: We were in Ward 17. It was the hospital section that I couldn't get to when I was in New York recently. Not recently, a few years ago, because it's in bad repair and the Park Rangers told me that they have to wear, I asked them if they would let me just take a peek, because I remember the Ward so well, and he said they have to wear hardhats and it's very dangerous, and they couldn't.

APPLEBOME: Describe to me what you remember.

AKAWIE: It was a long, a big Ward with a lot of beds, maybe twenty beds. And, uh, every bed was occupied by mostly children, but I remember an older woman that also had the same problem I had. And we were in the bathroom one day, it was the first time we saw running water. And, uh, her name was Hannah, I think. And I said something, "If God will help us--." And she almost hit me, because she says, "You mustn't mention God's name in a , in a bathroom." She got very angry with me. (She laughs.) But I was only a child.

APPLEBOME: What country was she from?

AKAWIE: She was from, uh, the Ukraine, too, but we didn't know each other before we got to Ellis Island. But my father and, uh, would send us food, like salamis and herring and all kinds of dolls. I had, uh, Fatty Arbuckle. You're too young to know who he was.

APPLEBOME: I remember Fatty Arbuckle.

AKAWIE: Do you?

APPLEBOME: I've seen his movies.

AKAWIE: And, uh--

APPLEBOME: So what, what did he do about Fatty Arbuckle?

AKAWIE: He sent us a doll.

APPLEBOME: A fatty Arbuckle doll.

AKAWIE: And I remember it, with the little cap and little short
pants that Fatty wore. And, uh, can I tell
you about my sister Dora? My middle sister.

APPLEBOME: Of course.

AKAWIE: Next to me. She was in Ellis Island, in, uh, staying
with my mother, waiting to be released. She didn't have any problem with
her head. We still can't figure out why. But, uh, she's very clean now,
too. I don't know if that did it. But one day we had a woman, Catherine,
who was the housekeeper. She kind of cleaned and swept around. And she was
kind of mean to everybody, but I started to make, uh, paper flowers.
Whenever I started to make flowers, she was so happy to get them that she

got to be very good to everybody. And, uh, I would use that as a bribe, in a way. Also, for Billy, the orderly. But he was very kind. And, uh, I learned how to make butter and cheese and I would hang it on the bed, foot of the bed, head of the bed. And, uh, I remember the office where they bring in the yellow sheets with the report of my, uh, they would take it, pull a few hairs--. Oh, I didn't finish. They would rip all my hair out. They would put adhesive tape. They called it a sweat cap. Put it all around my head, and my sister's, and everybody in the Ward. And then they, when it would be on for a little while, for the hair to grow, then they'd rip it off, and then they would test these hairs, and that's how I got to read the reports. But then the, a day came when it was all cured. And just when we were ready to leave my youngest sister got, started to cry during the night, and she was getting, we didn't know that it was Scarlet Fever. And she stayed another three, uh, no, yeah, another three months, I think. I'm not clear on that, But I remember her stretching out her hands to me not to let them take her. Because when Billy the, uh, orderly, put his white coat on, we knew he was going to a contagious Ward. Ward 17 wasn't considered contagious because, uh, we all had the same thing.

APPLEBOME: Where were your mother and brothers, other brothers and sisters staying during this time?

AKAWIE: At that time they were in another part of Ellis Island

waiting for us. But they only stayed three months.

APPLEBOME: Had you gotten to see your father yet?

AKAWIE: Oh, we saw my father the first day. Oh, it was very thrilling. He was all dressed up and he brought, a, uh, he found, he had a little glass, uh, a little glass jar from olives that he brought for my mother. He washed it, and brought it to her as a gift. And, uh we were just very happy to see him. But by the time we came to New York we had, somehow the experience on Ellis Island had aged us. We didn't want to sing any more. We were all grown up. I was there almost a year. Eight months was a long time. (Whispers.)

APPLEBOME: What kind of meals did they serve you while you were there?

AKAWIE: In Ellis Island?

APPLEBOME: Yes.

AKAWIE: I loved the food. I became very friendly with the cook. Gee, I could still remember if she used to sneak extra ice cream for me. (She laughs.) I'd help her with washing. They had big kettles and,

uh, copper kettles. It was a beautiful kitchen, although people at that time didn't realize it. But they had good food. We had potatoes, we had corn. Uh, we had lettuce, but it was like pickled. It was, uh, we thought that's the only way to eat lettuce, it would be in, uh, in brine, of vinegar and oil. But the thing we liked the best was the ice cream. We had some fruit.

APPLEBOME: Were you able to play with other children?

AKAWIE: Yeah, in the same Ward, but we couldn't go to another Ward. Miss Hannah would sneak me out sometimes.

APPLEBOME: So you weren't playing outside at all?

AKAWIE: Oh, no. We, oh, we'd go outside, but with the, in our area. I found--

APPLEBOME: Were the, were there children from other countries?

AKAWIE: They were from Italy. That's right. The children on that picture. From Italy, there were some from, uh, Russia, there were some from Roumania. We had a lot of kids. There were only about two or three, uh, older women in the Ward, the rest were kids.

APPLEBOME: What kind of games did you play?

AKAWIE: They had the same problem I had. We would run around on the grass. I once found a herring barrel. I didn't know if, I don't think I wrote about that.

APPLEBOME: I don't think so either.

AKAWIE: That's, my father did. He heard about it, he got so worried, he decide to mail me a package of herring. I don't think he could come every week to see us. So he would mail us packages. But I found a herring barrel, and I'd run out and sneak a herring and eat it. It must have been rotten. But I would look across New York City, the buildings, and I would dream of swimming across. That, that's the only way I'd ever see it again. But then I decided this was going to be my home. My parents would come and visit us, but I don't remember how often. My sisters we didn't see at all, except my youngest one, who was with me. And that was the, uh, experience of Ellis Island. And the day came when we were leaving, Miss Hannah took me, which was, you know, it just wasn't done. And my father was so proud of me that I had that kind of pull, or whatever you call it. But when I, when he came to get us, it was only me. They never notified that, uh, my sister wasn't coming with us. By the way, my sister Reba doesn't

like this story. I can't, she never read my journal because I mentioned lice. She's ashamed. (She laughs.)

APPLEBOME: It's nothing to be ashamed of. A lot of people had lice at that time.

AKAWIE: I don't feel that way. But, uh, she does.

APPLEBOME: Was your father as you remembered him?

AKAWIE: Oh, no. No. I didn't remember him, really.

APPLEBOME: Did you have to get re-acquainted?

AKAWIE: We sure did. I, I tell a story that my grandchildren just crack at when they hear me tell it. I'd be walking in Brownsville, you know where it is in New York, Brooklyn? And I'd be walking with a girlfriend on Pitkin Avenue at night and, you know, it was very safe and everybody would be "good-eyeing" us, as they called it in Russia. And i'd see my father walking from something, synagogue. And I'd yell, "Oh, there's my father." And he'd walk by and he'd say, "Hello." (She laughs.) We were, it was very hard for him, because he still wanted us as little children, and we had lived through so much by this time. My two older

sister got married very young and he wanted them to go to school and still be children, especially us. But he always thought that I would be a Hebrew teacher and go to Israel. I finally got to Israel twice and met a cousin that we hadn't seen since we were nine. and it was a very emotional meeting, and we became very close.

APPLEBOME: Tell me how New York compared with what your expectations of it were.

AKAWIE: Oh, I, I expected to find money on the streets, which I didn't, and it was a big disappointment.

"Cause you really believed that you'd find money on the street. And I think that, uh, oh, the, uh, the food was very important to me, somehow. Maybe to this day, I'm a, I'm a, I always liked to cook and make a lot of things. But, uh, we just thought it was great. We went, we went to Hebrew school, and we went to regular school, and my father sent us to, uh, the movies every Saturday for a nickel. But kids made fun of us, because we had no hair. You know, I had, my head was all shaved, and until it grew I wore a kerchief and, uh, the kids would make--. And they were mostly Jewish kids who made fun of us. They called us "greenhorn"

and "mockie" and "Go back to where you came from."

APPLEBOME: This was in Brownsville?

AKAWIE: This was in Brownsville.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember the trip to Brownsville the day that you left Ellis Island?

AKAWIE: Well, I remember being on the, on an elevator. I don't know, it used to be a sub--. I remember the IRT subway going to Brownsville, but there must have been some way from Ellis Island that my father had to take an elevator first because halfway home he took something out of his pocket and it was a, uh, a Jewish star with a gold chain. He put it around my neck. And he told me that he hopes I'll always wear it. And when we came into the house, it was really an old little, uh, apartment, downstairs, my father had rented it with the furniture and dishes. The people were moving out to another city. We bought, we rented it, but he bought all this, the, uh, furnishing. And when I walked in I thought, I always said that I thought I was

walking on pure plushina kovyorin, which means velvet rugs. And there was no rug at all on the floor, I found out later. But it was a real floor, and it was electricity and, uh, my mother made mashed potatoes and, uh, breaded veal cutlets. And to this day I remember the taste of it.

APPLEBOME: That was the meal that you had your first day?

AKAWIE: That was my first night meal. I came home, it was already dark, because I remember walking in and my mother put the lights on. And, uh, it was a very small house. My sister, one of my sisters and I had a room that didn't even have a window. It was a typical Brownsville apartment, but I got to love it because, uh, we went to regular school and, uh, I had one teacher Miss Colter, when I was in the sixth grade. That's as far as I went. Oh, no, I went to eighth, eighth grade. Miss Colter was, uh, always thought very highly, that I was a good student. But one time she caught me reading Ramola on top of the music book that I was supposed to be looking at. And she wasn't going to punish me because it was my first offense. And I promised never to do it again. But I used to, I was a very avid reader.

APPLEBOME: I don't know Ramola.

AKAWIE: It's about the old, uh, Italian, the doges, you know, that period. That's about all I can say right now. I don't remember who wrote it. Who was the, uh--

APPLEBOME: Tell me also, now your sister's still on Ellis Island. Would you go and visit her there?

AKAWIE: No, we weren't permitted to. She was in a contagious Ward. It was Scarlet Fever.

APPLEBOME: How did she describe it when she got off?

AKAWIE: She never, she never wants, she and my other youngest sister never want to talk about. My younger, other sister, was here last year. And the first time she insisted on reading my, uh, journal, and she said she was glad she did. But, but these were the two kids that didn't want people to know they were European because it was something, people made fun of us. So it was understandable. And there was one boy, Lou, Louie. I wrote about him in the journal. He wore a cap, and he was real mean. And he'd sit next to me while I was waiting my turn to, uh, skip rope, and he'd say, (sings), "Listen to the mockingbird." And one time, after a long torment, I hauled off and I hit him. And after that time I became the

fighter on the block. I used to beat up my cousins and, uh, my uncle would give me a dime for each time I did it, because that was their punishment. I did it for him. And I worked in this grocery store. I used to sweep the floor. And he'd give me a dime. And, uh, I'd save up the, uh, and I bought a, a--. Even saving a nickel was--. But my father gave me more money than most kids on the block. I think I used to get a nickel a day, which was a lot of money, or three cents a day.

APPLEBOME: What would you spend your money on?

AKAWIE: Ice cream. And I'd get a, uh, a chocolate bar, for two cents. And then I bought the, uh, the, uh, for to write my journal, for a nickel.

APPLEBOME: So, finally, how did all this compare with what you had expected? Was your family happy?

AKAWIE: Yes. My, uh, parents, well, my father was so delighted that my mother was here that my brother always said, "The reason we're here is because of Mama. Because if it was just for us I don't think you would have brought us." Which was just a bad joke. But my father always had tickets for the theater. Every

Saturday my mother was ready to go, and on Sunday sometimes. Then they'd have a lot of friends who would come and play cards. And, uh--

APPLEBOME: Did your father ever talk about still wanting to go back?

AKAWIE: No. Oh, no. Not after the, uh, when he saw the Revolution was successful. See, he didn't think they would be. He wasn't anxious for them to be. He, he even wanted to remain here. He was very happy. He was so delighted with my mother and, uh, they would be going out all the time to the, he had theater tickets, all the famous Jewish actors, Pinia Adler, Luther Adler was his son, by the way, and, uh, I remember him as a kid. He was already badly, uh, crippled with arthritis. I remember him on a bench.

APPLEBOME: Where would you go to the theater?

AKAWIE: Uh, there was the Liberty Theater on Liberty Avenue in Brownsville. There was the Hopkinson Theater. The Hopkinson my parents would send us. They'd give us a dollar, and each kid, we were four. So each kid a quarter. We would see a movie, and we would also see vaudeville. But I never liked the vaudeville. I didn't go much for the, uh, Yenta

Telebenda and Moishe Kapur. Are you familiar with that?

APPLEBOME: Not really.

AKAWIE: It was considered, today it's considered good, you know, part of Jewish culture, but at that time it's not, it wasn't considered good theater. My father would go to see King Lear and ,uh, you know, famous Shakespearean plays that were translated into Yiddish. And, Mirele Efros. I remember that he always talked bout. That's it.

APPLEBOME: Thank you. Thank you very much. You had a very interesting story to tell. This is the end of side two of tape one of the interview with Mrs. Bessie Akawie. This is Interview Number 151. This is the end of the interview.