

KECK-16

RENEE BERKOFF

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AGE 16

PASSAGE ON THE **BERENGARIA**

GUMB: This is Dana Gumb and I'm speaking with Mrs. Renee Berkoff on the 14th of August 1985 and we're beginning this interview at 2:20. We're about to interview Mrs. Berkoff about her immigration experience from Hungary in the year 1922. Beginning of tape one. Okay, Mrs. Berkoff, if you could begin with where and when you were born?

BERKOFF: I was born in Hungary, 1905, September 19th. I was not quite seventeen when I came to this country.

GUMB: And where in Hungary?

BERKOFF: I was born in Mor. M-O-R. It's, it's near the Danube. It's a small town.

GUMB: The Danube River?

BERKOFF: Near there, the Blue Danube, yes.

GUMB: Right. Um, what was life like in Hungary?

BERKOFF: Life was not good in Hungary, especially for the Jewish people because there was anti-Semitism. The Hurthy, H-U-R-T-H-Y, was like the Hungarian Hitler.

GUMB: That's the name, the name of the leader?

BERKOFF: That was the name of the leader, yes. My family suffered. So we were very anxious to come to America. My friend had a d here living in Pittsburgh and so, uh, my father was beaten, they mistreated him terribly. So my sister came over in, my uncle sent for my sister in 1921. And she was going to bring me out in 1922. She sent the money for me, she worked very hard and saved every penny, but my uncle had to send me an affidavit so I won't be a charge to the government so that nobody has to support me, he would take care of me. Those days anyway you needed to have an affidavit. And, of course, my parents hated to

leave me go, I was young and very naive. I come from a small town, but I had to have a chaperon. So my, my, uh, passport, everything was taken care of. I said goodbye, my mother packed my belongings, and she packed a beautiful fur piece for my sister. And you have to have twenty-five dollars when you came to this country at that time. Every immigrant could not enter the country unless they had \$25. So I said goodbye and went to Budapest to get my visa. But the American Consulate turned me down. After I said goodbye to my mother, father and sister and brother, I was told I cannot go. Young I was, naive I was, I cried bitter tears. I had a friend living there who lived in America and went back. He was a Professor in Pitt University and he was teaching English. So I could speak a little English already. And, uh, he said, "You just go back there and cry. Tell them you have to go." So three days it took me and I cried bitter tears. Finally the third day they had pity on me. But they said, "You're too young, you cannot go." I says, "Well, my chaperon's name is in the passport. I have somebody to go with." A woman from my own town went at the same time. So, uh, finally I got it. I left Budapest and we landed in Amsterdam. There we

had to be disinfected because they found some young girls and a couple, women too, who had little bugs in their hair. And, uh, we had to take showers with some disinfectant water everyday. And there was one lady, she was very nice to me, she looked at my hair every day so that my head was clean. And in the meantime my chaperon went away. I was left alone. So we were there two weeks in Amsterdam. And then from Amsterdam we went to Cherbourg. That's where I boarded the Berengaria from Cunard Line.

GUMB: Can you spell Cherbourg?

BERKOFF: Cherbourg. C-H-E-R-B-U-R-G [sic]. I think it is, this is in France.

GUMB: Right.

BERKOFF: So, naturally, as a poor girl, I travelled third class (she laughs) down in the bottom of the boat. There was four of us in one room. One very nice lady with two children and I was there. And, uh, after we got located whose bed is this and whose bed is that, and I put my things, my nightgown and jacket in my one little drawer. I went upstairs on the deck and then I was told to go in the dining room to have something to

eat. I did something, I don't remember any more what, but I had something to eat and then I went up on the deck again and one of the seamen, a fellow who worked there, he said, "Oh, boy, you're gonna feed the fishes pretty soon. You're green." It didn't take long. I had to run to the railing and I fed the fishes. Everything I ate went to the fishes in the ocean. I was very sick. All the way. It took us six days. I have never been in the dining room after that. There was, this lady was very nice, she helped me. In the morning they walked me up on the deck because I needed air and in the evening they walked me down. And I was on the deck all day long. But they brought me up food. Mostly Bismark herring, sour stuff because the stomach was upset. So that was six days. And then when we got towards Ellis Island the boat slowed down and oh, I felt better and I was happy. I met a very nice young girl. She was older than me and there was another girl. And when we saw Miss Liberty I can't tell you the feeling that we had. We were so happy and we started to sing. And I'm going to translate that song in English. We sang Hungarian. But I'll translate it in English. "In America life is golden. In America it's never dark. In America there's a lot

of money. In America the girl is happy. In America the flowers are more beautiful. In America the world is much better. In America living is golden. And that's where I'm longing to be, my dear." I translated that from Hungarian.

GUMB: Can you give it to us in Hungarian, too?

BERKOFF: (Hungarian) Can I dictate it?

GUMB: Oh, yeah, that's a good question, dictation, uh, i don't know how we're going to do it. Go ahead.

BERKOFF: (Hungarian) (she laughs) You didn't understand it but I told you what it sounds like.

GUMB: It sounds good.

BERKOFF: So then we were very, very happy when we came to Ellis Island already. The boats docked. I remember it was on a Friday afternoon. And, uh, then we were scared. Whether the doctor will find us well, and first they examined our passports and everything, our papers, that was the first thing they examined. That was the next day, of course. And, uh, the doctors examined the nails, the hair, the eyes, the mouth, the teeth, and chest. So, thank God, I went through. I was

always fat and healthy. So then came where is the money, twenty-five dollars. Oh, I must have it in my suit, I came with a wicker basket. And I opened it up and there was no money and there was no fur. I started to cry. What am I gonna be? I can't go to America. So then they sent a wire to my sister in Pittsburgh to send twenty-five dollars because you could not go into the country without twenty-five dollars. Every immigrant must have had the twenty-five dollars. So it took a day but I got, she sent twenty-five dollars. Then they put a ticket on my dress, they pinned it with a safety pin, my name and my sister's name and her address and everything, and Pittsburgh, that they should let me down in Pittsburgh. So then they put me on a boat with some others from Ellis Island and we went into Penn Station. They took us to New York and Penn Station. There they put me on a train to Pittsburgh. They told the conductor to let me off in Pittsburgh because I couldn't speak English. So I got there on Sunday. I got to Pittsburgh, my sister was waiting for me. And I can't tell you how happy I was. I wanted to kiss the ground because I was in America. The best country in the world. And ever since I say "God Bless

America." I'm very happy. I'm not rich, but I'm happy. And that means more than money.

GUMB: Well, um, that's quite a story. If we can go back, uh, and fill in some of the details.

BERKOFF: Yes, sure.

GUMB: Um, back in Hungary before you came over. What did your father do?

BERKOFF: My father was a cantor, a cantor in the synagogue.

GUMB: Oh, a cantor, oh, right, in the synagogue.

BERKOFF: Yes.

GUMB: And, uh, what sort of, was it a small village or . . .

BERKOFF: It wasn't a village. It was a small town. It was a small town, not a big city. It was not a city girl. I was a, I was very naive. My mother cried bitter tears. She didn't want me to go, but we wanted to bring the whole family out but my father didn't live much longer. Eight months later he died because this Hurthy bunch, they beat him so much because he was a religious Jew. So that we had to cut off his leg, he had blood poisoning. They had to cut off his leg and

he didn't live much longer. He never saw me after that.

GUMB: Oh, the doctor had to do that.

BERKOFF: Over there. He was hospitalized and they had to because they hit him so much that he had blood poisoning and they had to cut off his leg from the knee down.

GUMB: Did you go to school there, in the town?

BERKOFF: Yes, yes, I went to school. We had four elementary classes and then four classes, uh, well, I don't know what you would call it here, four classes of elementary and then like a high school, junior, let's say junior high, yes. Junior high, that's all I had.

GUMB: What had you heard about America?

BERKOFF: Everything good, of course. I had my uncle living here so, uh, he just, he wanted us to come because it's a good country. He made good in this country. He was a wealthy man so he wanted us to come. My father was his only brother. So he wanted us to come. He sent for my sister and then she worked hard and she send for me. In one year's time she saved up the

money to send for me. I don't know how much. I just thought of it the other day that I never paid her back. (she laughs) I feel terrible. But, poor thing, she's gone.

GUMB: Did you have brothers and sisters?

BERKOFF: I had, my mother, my parents had eight children. I was the seventh. But, very unfortunate, there was an epidemic the year I was born and they lost three children in one week. They had five children and three died in one week. And the two others were climbing the walls from the, uh, high temperature. And my mother was expecting me. She was pregnant with me. So, uh, then there was only, well, my brother and sister lived and then I was born and I had a younger sister, but she also passed away. I am the only one living out of eight children.

GUMB: So none of the other ones had a chance to come here.

BERKOFF: No, only the one sister, the one who sent for me.

GUMB: Oh, right, that was your sister.

BERKOFF: She's the one that came. And, uh, she was here one year and she sent money for me. And I came and I was

working and trying to bring the rest of the family over but unfortunately my father passed away eight months after I left. But it was, I left August and he died in March. So, uh, hard luck family in a way, but let's say I was the luckiest one. I'm still here in this wonderful country. And I love it.

GUMB: Right. Um, so, uh, had you studied, go ahead, had you studied America in school?

BERKOFF: Yeah, we had to go to school right away. They did not say we gonna learn Spanish, we gonna learn Hungarian. We had to go three times a week to school, night school. And I did pretty good. And then I studied. I think I went, this was in Pittsburgh, I went to business school. So I got a job as a cashier in a restaurant, nice restaurant, and then I learned bookkeeping, I did bookkeeping too, and selling. And by the way, I had a nephew living here. He came out in 1956 when the Russians occupied Hungary. And over there he was a gynecologist doctor. Then when he came here he worked for one hundred twenty-five dollars a month in a hospital as intern because he had to start all over again. But then he, uh, studied gyno-, I mean psychiatry. And then he made good. He was a

very good psychiatrist. Unfortunately, he's not a well man. He had to retire. He just celebrated his sixty-fifth birthday, but he had to retire because he has a bad heart condition. He has a beautiful family.

And after I lost my husband I just considered myself doubly lucky because he was very good to me.

Children I never had. And my nephew and his wife and children, they have two children, one son is a doctor and the other son is a, working in the federal reserve bank. And I'm celebrating my eightieth birthday. I was just told this morning, my niece told me that they're inviting friends and celebrate my eightieth birthday next month, which I think is beautiful because most young people don't want to have anything to do with older people. I know it. But even their children, they're very respectful and love me very much. So I'm happy because I'm lucky. I'm lucky.

GUMB: I was wondering back in school in Hungary, uh, what did you learn about America? Did you learn anything about America in school?

BERKOFF: No, no, I didn't. When I went to school I guess it wasn't, I learned from the map you know, where America is and all that, parts of America, but we were not

told. Only after I was through and when this Hurthy business came up, you know, that's when we were thinking about America, that's when my family said we better go, get out.

GUMB: Were you ever threatened by the Hurthy group?

BERKOFF: My father, my father, he was taken away from home and, uh, they put him with other people, other Jews, in like a big garage. And because he was very religious and he wouldn't eat the non-kosher food they beat him, they hit him. And then they kept him about three days there and he didn't eat nothing. Then one day they threw him out on the, you know, on the, on the ground, and a peasant man came with his horse and buggy and picked him up and brought him home and went straight to the hospital. It was very unfortunate, very unfortunate. It's too bad that this gener--, well, that was a long time ago, but.

GUMB: So, when you decided that you and your parents decided that you should leave, um, you had to go to the embassy in Budapest?

BERKOFF: That was, yes, for my visa. Everything else was taken care of at home, at my home town. My passport and my

uncle sent the affidavit. And my sister sent money. Everything was taken care of at home. The only thing was the consulate, I had to go to the consulate, the an consulate, to get the visa. And that's when they turned me down. After I said goodbye already to my family and everybody. It was very hard. Very hard for me. But he said, "You're young, you better stay here with your mother and father." But I said, "I have my sister there, my uncle there and I have a chaperon who will take care of me, watch me." Well, finally the third day this professor told me, he said, "You just don't give in. Just go in and cry. They have a heard. They'll take care of you. They'll let you go." So finally the third day they left me go. Meanwhile my chaperon went away.

GUMB: How did you get the chaperon?

BERKOFF: She's, she was a neighbor of ours in our home town. Her husband was here, living here, and, uh, she was coming to her husband with a little child.

GUMB: And the American officials required that you have a . . .

BERKOFF: That I have a chaperon, yeah, because when you're

under age, under twenty-one, you cannot leave the country. You have to have a chaperon.

GUMB: How did you get from your home town to Budapest?

BERKOFF: Train, two hours by train.

GUMB: And you did that alone, by yourself?

BERKOFF: Yes, because I did go to school in Budapest for one year. I went to, well, I lived in Budapest after I finished junior high I lived in Budapest for one year and took business course, you know, business school for one year. So I wasn't afraid to ride alone because I had a funny incident. Once I was home for Christmas vacation and, uh, I travelled second class, the train second class had three seats on each side. It was a separate little room, you know, and on the outside there was a big foyer, like. And it was a bitter cold day and, uh, finally at one station one man got out. There was no room for me in the little room, no seat. So finally one man got out and I went in. And one man says to the other, "Thank God that that Jew got out of here." And me, little innocent thing, I didn't dare to open my mouth. I just didn't say nothing. "Thank God that that Jew got out of

here." They didn't know that another Jew got in there. (she laughs) That was really, it was really bad.

GUMB: How did they know you were a Jew?

BERKOFF: They didn't know me. The man who got out was a Jew. They said, "Thank God that that Jew got out of here" and this little girl, I came in there. He didn't know that I was a Jew.

GUMB: Oh, I see, he was talking about the, I didn't follow, he was talking about the other person. So you didn't dare go in and sit down.

BERKOFF: I did go in because I was freezing outside on the, uh, like a foyer, the second class was. They had separate compartments. But there was one long foyer and that's where I was standing freezing after Christmas vacation. So finally this man out of one compartment came out and I was shivering and I went in and sat down. So one man said to the other, "Thank God that Jew got out of here," and he didn't know that another Jew got in. (she laughs)

GUMB: It takes me a little while to . . .

BERKOFF: That's all right. But to me, I cannot forget this. It struck me funny. But I was scared. I was scared because I was young. But I got by.

GUMB: So, um, once you had gotten your visa from the consulate, how did you get the boat ticket, the ship ticket?

BERKOFF: Oh, my sister took care of that. See, she sent the money, I came through Cunard Line, that's where I got my ticket.

GUMB: Oh, she sent you the ticket. She paid for it and Cunard Line gave it.

GUMB: Oh, I see, okay. And, so you left, what was the port where you left from?

BERKOFF: I left from Cherbourg. From Budapest I went to Amsterdam. By train. And that's where we were kept, I told you, and, uh, what do you call it, quarantined, quarantined, because we were not clean. I was, but a few of them. There was most of them, but a few of them were not clean, so we were disinfected there for two weeks. We could not get out. Meantime my chaperon did get out.

GUMB: There was a kind of a group traveling together?

BERKOFF: Yes, yes, a group.

GUMB: Of Hungarian Jews?

BERKOFF: That's right.

GUMB: From your village, or?

BERKOFF: Not necessarily. Cunard Line had so many passengers at that same day.

GUMB: Oh, I see. They were all Cunard Line passengers.

BERKOFF: Yes, yeah.

GUMB: So, did the shipping line arrange the railroad ticket?

BERKOFF: Yes, everything from home to America was taken care of, yeah.

GUMB: So, the group arrived in Amsterdam.

BERKOFF: Yes.

GUMB: And you were quarantined.

BERKOFF: Quarantined for two weeks.

GUMB: Where did they keep you?

BERKOFF: They had a building there. And they had showers. Oh, I was so angry. There was one man, he was a Cunard Line man. He opened the curtain when I'm standing there. Young girls taking a shower and I was naked. And I said, "Pull that curtain." He says, "So what, you have the same thing that the other one has." It was rude. I was really, really having a hard time there. But, uh, you see, we had to take showers with some kind of special soap and special, we had to be disinfected. Cause you cannot come to America unless you are just so, clean, and if they find anything wrong, back you go. I knew of one man who was sent back because they found that he had TB. They put him here in the hospital in Ellis Island, but, uh, incurable, he wasn't curable. They couldn't cure him so they shipped him back. So we were scared of that and we tried to keep clean. And, uh, thank god we made it. I don't know, but the other girl who was, became my friend, only there, she didn't have twenty-five dollars either. Her brother said he will send her twenty-five dollars to Ellis Island, but he never did. I was lucky I got the twenty-five, I left her, but so foolishly I never asked for an address or

anything. I lost contact with her altogether.

GUMB: So, the building in Amsterdam where you were kept, you weren't allowed to leave the building?

BERKOFF: No, no, no. We could sit outside. It was big. Nice big place. But we could not go into the City.

GUMB: Was it next to the docks?

BERKOFF: That's right. The boats were all there. We saw, it was nice scenery, it was nice, but we were not allowed to leave. After all, they were responsible for us.

GUMB: How big a group was it, do you remember?

BERKOFF: That I really don't remember. I don't exactly remember. Maybe about fifty or so.

GUMB: So you slept in the building, they had . . .

BERKOFF: They had beds for us, but the, the beds were separated with wiring so we could see each other. And I believe that was the same thing in Coney, in Ellis Island, I believe so, but I slept most of the time on the stone bench. They have, they have stone benches there. That's how I got to talk to this young man because I says, oh, I remember when I was there, a few years

ago, I remember these stone benches. This is where I slept.

GUMB: Right, on Ellis Island.

BERKOFF: Yeah, yeah. But we had beds.

GUMB: What kind of food did they feed you in quarantine?

BERKOFF: That I don't remember. I don't think it was very good because even on the boat, the third class, was very poor food. Mostly herring they gave us, and potatoes and tomatoes. I remember because I said to one man, he was from America, I said, "I don't like potatoes or tomatoes." He says, "Hey, girly, that's potatoes or tomatoes."

GUMB: What man was this?

BERKOFF: A man who was in Hungary visiting from America. He lived in America. But he also travelled third class, wasn't a rich man.

GUMB: Oh, I see.

BERKOFF: On the boat this was. I said, "I want potatoes and tomatoes." He said, "That's not potatoes and, it's tomatoes and potatoes." But then there was a very

nice Englishman. I'll never forget him. His name was Phillip. He was so good to me. He walked me up and took care of me. And he said, "Give me something, I want to remember you." I said, "I don't have nothing, I'm poor." He said, "Give me a shoe lace." How could I give him a shoe lace. I can't go to America without a shoe lace. But he was such a nice man. I wish he would have given me, some day I would have thanked him, he was so good to me. He was older and I was a young girl. Most people were nice to me because I was sick.

GUMB: He was just traveling.

BERKOFF: He was traveling also. He was an Englishman. And, uh, because I was so sick, I guess they felt sorry for a young girl who travels alone.

GUMB: So he was also traveling steerage?

BERKOFF: He was steerage, yes.

GUMB: So there was a lot of, lot of non-immigrants in steerage?

BERKOFF: Oh, yes, yes, sure. Some people who were visiting from America, they traveled steerage, too.

GUMB: Right. How did that Englishman help you, how did he help you?

BERKOFF: Sometimes when I was cold he would cover me up and, uh, you want something, I'll bring you something, so he would bring me something that I could eat, because I couldn't eat. He was very good to me. Phillip. I remember his name was Phillip. That's all I remember.

GUMB: Back in the quarantine house, uh, um, how did you pass the time? You were there for two weeks?

BERKOFF: Two weeks we were there. Yeah, well, we were young. It was singing and dancing and telling stories. That's all. No movies or anything else, no. We cannot, we could not get off, get away from that building.

GUMB: This is the end of side one.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

GUMB: This is the beginning of side two. Um, we were talking about the quarantine, Mrs. Berkoff. Why did they have to keep you for two weeks? Why that long?

BERKOFF: That was the rule that the Cunard Line had. It could be that America requested Cunard Line to keep us there until we're perfectly clean and because it takes more than just a day or two, because those little things come back in the head, too, and they multiply. So they want to be sure that everybody's clean, which is a wonderful thing.

GUMB: So you didn't get any explanation or anything explained to you why you were there, and . . .

BERKOFF: Yeah, they did tell us that we had to be disinfected, they did tell us, sure. And they told us to try to keep clean, sure, definitely.

GUMB: What kind of clothes were you wearing at this time?

BERKOFF: Not much different, well, not such nice clothes like the do here, but we only got clothes twice a year on the holidays, that's all. My parents were not rich, they were poor, and, uh, but twice a year we got new clothes. Then when I came here they, my sister bought me clothes, American. But, uh, I was not a peasant girl. The peasants in Hungary, they wear different clothes. They wear two, three skirts, real wide, gathered, and, uh, blouses different and, of course,

kerchief. I didn't wear no kerchief. I was fairly modernized.

GUMB: Right. That wasn't a problem with the people in the group.

BERKOFF: Oh, no, no, no, no, no, that was nobody, I don't think the peasants would want to leave Hungary, they had no trouble, they didn't have to leave Hungary.

GUMB: How did these people, the people who had problems with lice, uh, how did they get them, where did they get them?

BERKOFF: Maybe they brought them home from, maybe they were not clean at home. So that they had to put kerosene on their heads. That kills the bugs. Oh, they stunk. Yeah.

GUMB: Okay, so, um, uh, finally after two weeks in the quarantine you were allowed to get on the vessel.

BERKOFF: Yeah, we were very happy. Of course, Holland is a beautiful place, when we got there, what we saw was very beautiful. Some homes that we passed by on the bus from the train and, uh, people were nice. And then, uh . . .

GUMB: You mentioned a lot of the people that you met, you've already mentioned a lot of the people you met on the vessel, um, uh, you know, there was the Englishman and, uh . . .

BERKOFF: Englishman and some Americans.

GUMB: Did you meet any other immigrants, I forget if you mentioned them already?

BERKOFF: Well, this girl that I became very friendly with, she was an immigrant. And, poor thing, I felt sorry for her because she didn't have no twenty-five dollars. Her brother didn't send it in time, but I'm sure he did later. But there was, we were, most of us were immigrants. Most of us were immigrants.

GUMB: In steerage.

BERKOFF: That's right, that's right.

GUMB: So the, the steerage, was it one big open area or, I think you said there were little cabins.

BERKOFF: Oh, yes, sure, four of us in one cabin. Sure, we had cabins, and we had, like, the bunk beds, up and down, up and down, bunk beds, yes.

GUMB: So, it was fairly nice accommodations, or . . .

BERKOFF: Well, it was clean. There was a man who cleaned the room, yes, it was fairly nice. Not, nothing elegant about it, but, uh, for necessity just place to sleep and that's it.

GUMB: And how long was the voyage?

BERKOFF: Six days.

GUMB: Six days.

BERKOFF: Six days. We left Monday, or was it Sunday afternoon, or Monday, and we got here Friday afternoon. Very happy. Yeah, it was great.

GUMB: Do you remember where the vessel docked, where it came into New York?

BERKOFF: I remember when I passed Miss America, Miss Liberty, that, and then close to Ellis Island, I don't really remember, although I was standing up, by that time I was good already, I felt better because the boat come in slowly and, uh, we could see Miss Liberty and we were happy and singing, but I don't remember just how we came.

GUMB: Right. Uh, had you heard about Miss Liberty in Roumania?

BERKOFF: Oh, yes, yes. We called it the Statue, the Statue of Liberty, yeah. And liberty sounded so good for us. (she laughs) That's a great word for us, liberty.

GUMB: While we're doing a lot of Hungarian here, what was the expression in Hungarian?

BERKOFF: (Hungarian) Liberty, the Statue of Liberty. Well, liberty comes first. (Hungarian) Liberty statue, liberty statue. In English it's Statue of Liberty and in Hungarian it's Liberty Statue. Sure, we heard about it.

GUMB: So you landed on, do you remember anything about the ferry that went to Ellis Island or how you got there from the boat, do you remember anything about that?

BERKOFF: I think we went straight into the building. If I remember correctly the ferry took us from Ellis Island to New York, we went on the ferry, but I think the boat landed pretty close to the building.

GUMB: Okay, you don't remember getting on any other boat.

BERKOFF: No, no, straight from the Berengaria we went into the building. This is what I remember. I may be wrong, but that's what I remember.

GUMB: Could you spell Berengaria?

BERKOFF: B, Berengaria. B-E-R-E-N-G-A-R-I-A. Berengaria, yeah. I did that again, I'm sorry.

GUMB: So, when you arrived on Ellis, uh, what were your first impressions? What was the first procedure in the process?

BERKOFF: Well, the first thing that they did was look at our papers. They examined our papers to see if everybody has the right visa and passport and the affidavit which was very important that my uncle will support me, that the government won't have to worry about me. And, uh . . .

GUMB: Do you remember who did that, who . . .

BERKOFF: It was an office, there was a lady, I'm sure it was a lady, clerk.

GUMB: Did she have a uniform on?

BERKOFF: That I don't remember.

GUMB: Did she ask any questions?

BERKOFF: Probably so, but everything was written down and, as you know, most of the immigrants don't speak English. I spoke a few words, as I said. I studied for about two months, but it didn't help me too much, but potato and tomato. And, uh, maybe she did, what my name was and then she looked at my papers and that was all right. And then we went to the doctors.

GUMB: Do you remember any interpreter when they examined your papers?

BERKOFF: No.

GUMB: There wasn't any interpreter or any other person.

BERKOFF: No, no, no. 'Cause everything was there in English, everything was in English.

GUMB: Do you remember what part of the building, anything about, you know, from the boat . . .

BERKOFF: An office, it was an office building, but the doctors examined us in a big, big room and we were standing in line, next, next, next.

GUMB: You were standing in line?

BERKOFF: We were standing in line for the doctor, that I remember, yeah, and the doctor looked at the nails, and the eyes, the mouth, ears, the teeth, and chest. And one after another we went, and when I was through that I was very happy until I missed my twenty-five dollars, that was the last thing.

GUMB: How long did it take, that examination?

BERKOFF: Not too long, not too long, because there was a lot of people. Don't forget, it wasn't only third class, there was first and second class, too. Some people had rich relatives and they sent first class ticket or second class ticket for them. There was three classes on the boat.

GUMB: Right. Uh, do you remember, did you have to walk up steps or anything to get to that large area where the doctors were?

BERKOFF: It was all on one floor as far as I remember, I think it was all on, the office and doctors was all on one floor, yeah.

GUMB: So then after the medical examination what was the

next . . .

BERKOFF: The next thing they wanted the twenty-five dollars.

GUMB: So what happened, what happened, someone asked you for your money and you had to show it.

BERKOFF: Yeah, yeah, you had to show twenty-five dollars. Every immigrant had to have twenty-five dollars.

GUMB: U.S., twenty-five dollars U.S.?

BERKOFF: Of course, of course, yeah. But, uh, mine was gone and the fur piece was gone, too.

GUMB: So what happened, how did you lose it, I don't know if you said this before?

BERKOFF: Somebody stole it. I didn't lose it. You see, as I told you, I came with a wicker basket, I came with a, I had a wicker basket. And this is the way I could carry it. I don't know, I had it in my room and the lock was not very secure. I think it was easy, and my mother put it on top. She was afraid I was going to lose it in my pocketbook because I was young. She didn't put it in my pocketbook, she put it in the, uh, that little wicker basket where I had my belongings,

and on top of it she put a very pretty fur piece for my sister to wear around her neck, and she put the twenty-five dollars. Well, they never thought that somebody was gonna steal it. She thought it was more safe in there than in my pocketbook.

GUMB: So where was the twenty-five dollars?

BERKOFF: In the wicker basket on the top.

GUMB: Oh, in the wicker basket, just sitting on the top.

BERKOFF: Yes, sitting on the top with the fur piece and the wicker, and the twenty-five dollars, so, uh, that was gone. The fur piece was gone and the twenty-five dollars was gone.

GUMB: You think it was stolen on the boat?

BERKOFF: I don't know because I never looked at it from the time I left home. I didn't know where. It could have been on the boat, and it could have been in Ellis Island, too. Not that I want to accuse anybody, but American people are smarter than the Europeans, it could have been one of the fellows who worked there cleaning the room, I don't know. And it could have been somebody in steerage, there was four of us in the

room. I don't know. But I never missed it until they asked me for it.

GUMB: Pretty terrifying situation.

BERKOFF: It was, I thought I was going to be shipped back home. But then they got in touch with my sister and she sent it.

GUMB: So what did they, when you didn't have the money, what did they do to you?

BERKOFF: Shipped me back. I had to go back in my room and stay there.

GUMB: On Ellis Island.

BERKOFF: On Ellis Island, yes.

GUMB: So they, they put you in a . . .

BERKOFF: It was like a room, a compartment actually with a bed. But I sat most of the time on the stone bench. They had stone benches all around. And that's where I sat with this other girl who was going to Detroit. We were sitting and talking. By that time we were very disappointed. Didn't know how we were going to get, me to my sister and her to her brother.

GUMB: Was it a single room, or small room?

BERKOFF: Our bed was, just like a little compartment. Just a bed, enough to put the things down.

GUMB: Was it a great distance from the Great Hall, you know, from the main hall?

BERKOFF: It was a great big hall and there was beds. Like a compartment.

GUMB: Was it a great distance from the place where the doctors examined you?

BERKOFF: Yeah, yeah, it was quite a walk.

GUMB: Were you under guard, or . . .

BERKOFF: No, no, we were not under guard. We were all right. We were good people. (she laughs) No, no guard, no.

GUMB: So how did you, did someone come to help you, was there any assistance, like from HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society?

BERKOFF: No, no, HIAS didn't do nothing. Nobody did anything for me. My sister and my uncle.

GUMB: So, you might have said it before, but, your sister, um, she, how did you make contact with your sister to let her know that you didn't have the twenty-five dollars?

BERKOFF: Not me, the authorities did. Ellis Island did.

GUMB: Oh, the authorities. Oh, I see.

BERKOFF: I wouldn't know what to do. They did. They got in touch with her and that I needed the twenty-five dollars. And she probably wired it or somehow it got there in a day or two and that's when they let me go.

GUMB: Okay. So it nothing, you had nothing to do with the wire, or . . .

BERKOFF: No, no, they did, the office, the authorities did that, they took care, got in touch with her, yeah.

GUMB: So no one came to talk to you about it or asked you any questions?

BERKOFF: No, I just said, I cried, I said, "I had twenty-five dollars here, I don't know what happened." And I think because I was young and naive they could see that I was very naive, just a small town girl, didn't

know any better, so they had pity on me. And they took care of it for me.

GUMB: So, how many nights did you spend there?

BERKOFF: Two nights, two nights. She sent the money right away I guess. Those days I don't think it went as fast as it does today. But this other girl, she, I left her there. She, from her brother she never had the money yet when I left. Felt so sorry for her. And I never thought of asking her address. She was a nice girl.

GUMB: Were those sleepless nights? Do you remember anything about what that experience was like?

BERKOFF: No, I really don't. I cried enough.

GUMB: Yeah, it must have been really terrifying.

BERKOFF: I cried a lot. First of all, for leaving my parents, for leaving home. And I was scared. I didn't, I was hoping that they'll all come, you know, to America. That's why my sister came and that's why I came. She brought me over. I wanted them to come to America, but still I was afraid that I would never see them, which I never saw my father again. But I did see my mother, after five years I went home to see her, yeah.

GUMB: Do you remember what you had to eat during that time on Ellis?

BERKOFF: On the boat?

GUMB: No, on Ellis, those two days?

BERKOFF: I really don't remember the food. I don't think it was the best. I doubt it. But, uh, I don't remember. I really can't say.

GUMB: Okay, so, um, uh, did someone come and bring word to you that the twenty-five dollars, that your sister had sent the twenty-five dollars.

BERKOFF: They just said you can go. And they pinned a, a ticket on me. They called me out and they put the ticket on me with my name, with a safety pin. I never saw a safety pin before. I thought it was funny. And my sister's name and address and they said to ship me, let me off in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. So then they put me on the ferry, they didn't say nothing else. They said, "All right." They gave me the money. They gave me the money.

GUMB: Oh, they gave you the twenty-five dollars?

BERKOFF: Oh, yes, yes, that was mine. They gave me the money and put me on the ferry boat and shipped me to New York, with others, and then put me on the Pennsylvania train.

GUMB: Was anybody accompanying you on the boat?

BERKOFF: Especially?

GUMB: Yeah, like a chaperon or anything?

BERKOFF: No, well, there was a whole group of us and one man, whoever, who, well, who takes the ferry from one place to the other, the captain, or whatever he is. But nobody was, Cunard maybe, no, no, I don't think so. They put us on the ferry boat and took us over to New York.

GUMB: Did you mention there was a Cunard Line, I can't pronounce it right, Cunard Line agent that was helping people get through the process?

BERKOFF: Oh, yes, they have to, sure, after all, we were their charges, we were their responsibility.

GUMB: Right. Did that person have any contact with you while you were on Ellis?

BERKOFF: Not especially.

GUMB: No. But did you know of this person?

BERKOFF: No, no. Didn't know. He was just from Cunard Line, that's all.

GUMB: And he was there during the examination?

BERKOFF: No, no, he wasn't there.

GUMB: Was there an agent on Ellis Island? Was there anybody on Ellis Island?

BERKOFF: I think so, I think so because he had to see that his patients, not his patients, his passengers, get through.

GUMB: But you never talked to him or had any contact.

BERKOFF: No, no, it was a group, they did not give us individual attention.

GUMB: Right, okay. So, um, unaccompanied, well, with a group, you went on to Penn Station and um, did anybody, anyone, well, the whole group just went together on the train.

BERKOFF: Yes, yes, yes.

GUMB: So you really didn't need any individual . . .

BERKOFF: Yes, because the ticket was there and the conductor came to me, put me on the train, gave me a seat. I was what they called those days "greenhorn." Did you ever hear that expression? (she laughs) So that's a greenhorn and he gave me a seat and he said, "You just sit there and when we come to Pittsburgh I'll put you off."

GUMB: How did he communicate that to you?

BERKOFF: Well, I understood some English, there weren't any . . .

GUMB: Nobody in Hungary who would talk to me, because the immigrants each went a different way. They didn't, I think I was the only one coming to Pittsburgh.

GUMB: So how did your impression, your first impression of America compare to your expectations back in Hungary, how did the two compare?

BERKOFF: I understand what you mean. I was happy to be here. But I didn't have to like it much at the beginning, you know. I didn't know what to do. I was obligated

to my sister, to my uncle, and uh, but it didn't take me long. I learned to love America fast enough. I mean, I started to go to school and to meet other kids, you know, talk to children, to other boys, and then I got a job, then I was fine and I love America.

I keep on saying that because I do. It's just like God Bless America. Best country in the world. If only the people would know, if they would know, if they would live in the other countries and know what life was like there where you cannot say what you want to say. Then they would appreciate it.

GUMB: You said you went back to Hungary five years later . . .

BERKOFF: Yes. I was back in '80, '81, '82, '84.

GUMB: Oh, I thought it was five years after you came over you went back.

BERKOFF: Oh, yeah, yeah. Lately I went because I suffer from arthritis so I went for baths. After I was here five years I went back to visit my mother. She was widowed by then, you know. And, uh . . .

GUMB: How did it feel to go back to the old country?

BERKOFF: Feels funny, feels funny. And, uh, like recently when I was there, they said, "Why don't you come back?" You couldn't give me, all of Hungary to go back there.

Where you have to be so careful of what you're saying and you never know who you're talking to. You know, it's Russian occupied, I was in Budapest. And, uh, like once I traveled by cab because cabs are cheap there, I would have gotten lost traveling on the bus.

So one cab driver says to me, "What about you Americans, you can chase the Russians out of Austria, why don't you chase them out of Hungary? We don't want them here." I didn't say nothing. I was afraid he could have been a spy. You have to be very careful what you're saying there. There's no comparison. And that's supposed to be the best satellite country. Hungary has it better than any other satellite country.

GUMB: How long did it take you to become a citizen?

BERKOFF: Five years. And I was very proud of it when I got that red book. No, the red book was the passport. As soon as I became a citizen I got the passport which was a red book and I was very proud of it. I went home to visit my mother right away. Five years. It

takes five years. First year you get the green card.

And then four more years you get citizenship, a nice piece of paper.

GUMB: Was there, you know, were there any feelings of remorse or regret at all, you know, it's sort of like closing a door on the other old country, isn't it, when you become a citizen here?

BERKOFF: Well, yes, I did. Except that my mother was there, but otherwise I wasn't interested in Hungary at all. I was in a good country. I was very happy to be here. Just that my mother was there and my sister and brother, but otherwise I didn't, my brother, he should have come here, too. But couldn't make it. He was in concentration camp. But, uh, I loved it here. It didn't take me long to learn to love America, let me put it that way.

GUMB: Did it take long to learn English?

BERKOFF: No. I, you probably still detect the Hungarian accent when I talk, but I pick up languages pretty fast. And I didn't forget the Hungarian language. I was surprised when I was back last year that I still speak it very well. It didn't take me long because we had

to go. Now you see, I think it's terrible that today that teachers have to learn Spanish to talk to the Spanish immigrants. The teachers did not learn Hungarian to talk to us. We had to learn three times a week, three nights a week we went to school, night school. It was compulsory. And it didn't take me long to learn.

GUMB: When you first arrived, uh, in Pittsburgh, did you go to school or go to work? I forget.

BERKOFF: I went to school for a while. I went to school for a while.

GUMB: In Roumania, yeah, in Roumania, in Hungarian, rather, or in English, it was an English school?

BERKOFF: American school, sure, the public school. Every night we went to public school. There was quite a few of us in the class. Thirty, forty people in the class. And I remember one thing when my teacher told me, she said, "You do much better in your English than I could do in Hungarian."

GUMB: Oh, it was a kind of English class for . . .

BERKOFF: Sure, we learned to read and write in English,

definitely. And it was wonderful. That way we got a job quicker. We were able to work quicker. It was wonderful.

GUMB: Was there a kind of Hungarian community there in Pittsburgh?

BERKOFF: Yes, yes, there was the Hungarian club. It was called Hungarian club and every Sunday night we used to have gypsy music, you know, that famous, the gypsy music we used to have and enjoy ourselves, all the Hungarians got together.

GUMB: Um, don't answer it yet. I'm wondering why at Ellis Island you slept on the stone benches instead of your bed in the room.

BERKOFF: Because I was very restless. I couldn't sleep. I wanted to get to my sister. I was very worried. The sooner I got out, so I couldn't sleep good in bed. I went out, I got up and I went out and that was the stone benches and I laid down there and cried plenty.

GUMB: You were allowed to wander around?

BERKOFF: Yeah, sure, we were allowed to wander around. If you had money you could buy things there, too. But I

didn't have any money.

GUMB: What kind of things could you buy there, do you remember?

BERKOFF: They were selling there I think cards, or some little notions like that. Maybe food, too, if I remember. You could buy something like rolls or a sandwich, yeah.

GUMB: Do you remember if they served you kosher food?

BERKOFF: On the boat I heard that they were serving kosher food, but in Ellis Island I don't remember. That I don't remember. Maybe those who eat western, maybe they did get it because after all they were Cunard Line passengers, so if they requested kosher food they did get it, but I'm not sure. In Ellis Island, I know on the boat this American man told me, I wasn't down in the dining room but he told me that he was getting kosher food. A lot of herrings and potatoes and tomatoes.

GUMB: Generally, how did the officials treat you on Ellis Island?

BERKOFF: Good, good, yes, no complaint.

GUMB: No problem?

BERKOFF: Yes, yeah. I think they were maybe sorry for us, but really I can't complain. They were nice. The doctors were strict. Well, maybe we were more scared, you know, hoping that he finds nothing wrong with us.

GUMB: Were there female doctors examining female immigrants/

BERKOFF: I only had a man doctor. I only remember a man.

GUMB: If you could tell us, what happened to your chaperon?

BERKOFF: She came here to her husband. I saw her here. She lived in the Bronx. I was going to tell you a funny story, that after five years when I visited my mother and when I came back she was supposed to meet me at the boat here in New York. And she wasn't there. I didn't see her. So I saw a man who was sleeping there, working there by the boat, you know, what do you call it, you know, not the airport, where the boat is. I said, "Mister, she lives on Longfellow Avenue." I says to him, "Mister, do you know where Longfellow Avenue is?" He said, "You mean the bigga talla Avenue man? Me no see." (she laughs)

GUMB: This was on Ellis Island?

BERKOFF: No, no, you asked me if I saw my chaperon after, and we got together quite often, I visited her. And after five years when I came back from a visit I asked her to wait for me at the boat, see?

GUMB: Oh, I see.

BERKOFF: See, she lived on Longfellow Avenue, that's all right. She lived on Longfellow Avenue. So she wasn't there. So I asked one of the sweepers, I didn't know how to get to Longfellow Avenue. I said, "Mister, do you know where is Longfellow Avenue?" He said, "You mean that bigga tall fellow? Me no see." Something funny there.

GUMB: I meant back in Amsterdam, your chaperon was with you.

BERKOFF: I saw her but she was ready to leave.

GUMB: So she just left.

BERKOFF: She left because her boat, her group left. The day I got there I just said hello to her, I saw her, she was already on the other boat to go to Cherbourg.

GUMB: So she didn't accompany you on the boat?

BERKOFF: No, no. I came alone.

GUMB: Did they ask you about her on Ellis Island?

BERKOFF: No, no. They didn't. And her name was in my passport.

GUMB: And nobody asked any questions about it.

BERKOFF: Nobody asked me any questions.

GUMB: End of tape one, side two. End of interview with Mrs. Berkoff.

BERKOFF: Thank you. God Bless America. You can put that in there.