

KECK-161

IVAN DE MERIT

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RUSSIA, 1920

AGE 14

PASSAGE ON "THE ESTONIA"

APPEL: This is Willa Appel, I'm speaking with Mr. Ivan De Merit  
on Friday, February 7th, 1986. We're  
beginning the interview at 3:25, and we're going to be  
talking with Mr. De Merit about his immigration  
experience from Russia in 1920 when he was 14 years old.  
Mr. De Merit, can we begin by you telling me a little  
bit about the town in which you were born in Russia.

DE MERIT: Firstly, I was born in the city of Ivankow. That's what  
my name is, Ivan. That means of Ivan. I-V-A-  
N-K-O-W. After a week's stay, after birth I was moved  
back to my home in Domanovke. D-O-M-A-N-O-V-K-E. Which

is a combination word meaning home and remem,  
reminiscence. The town was a little village of about  
two hundred and some people. Homes lining a street  
consisting the length of the entire town. And the road  
led from one other town to a, another city. The, uh,  
people in the town were mostly illiterate farming  
people. We had an elder. My father was in business at  
that time. Engaged in a flour mill, cereal mill, and  
wool mill. Besides all that, he had a general store,  
and he was an engineer with, uh, several hundred people  
working on roads. He was quite a wealthy man and at  
that time I enjoyed all the privileges of wealth. That  
was still during the Czarist times.

APPEL: You were born in 1906.

DE MERIT: Five. Five.

APPEL: 1905. And also just to help me place where this, what  
part of Russia?

DE MERIT: It's located in the Ukraine. Kiev is the capital of the  
Ukraine. And this was approximately, uh, a

hundred miles from Kiev on the (?) River.

APPEL: Uh-huh.

DE MERIT: Almost, most of your cities and towns followed tributaries of the (?) river and other off-shoots. For the sake of getting water and, uh, washing laundry. (He laughs.)

APPEL: And can you tell me a little bit about, uh, what happened in your life that made your family decide to emigrate.

DE MERIT: Uh, prior to my coming here I had a grandmother whose husband died with quite a number of kids. She had, uh, nine girls and four sons. Two of those were from a prior marriage of her husband. And they decided to leave Russia about 1909. I was about four years old at the time. I vividly remember her leaving Russia. I was her favorite grandson. She decided after coming here that she would love to have me here and she plied her brood to raise the necessary money to bring me and my sister. Both of us came here at the same time. I was the official boss of the party because I was the elder of the two. She was two years younger than I was. And that was the reason for my coming here. It was purely an accident. I may have become a commissar in Russia or, or some big, big shot.

APPEL: So your grandmother left with her family in 1909.

DE MERIT: Yes. 1909.

APPEL: And it was 1920, so it was a good 11 years later that you came.

DE MERIT: Yeah, before they were able, people came here now, they settle themselves within a year or two or three. Uh, that time it took, uh, ten years or more before they became settled.

APPEL: And was your coming connected to what was happening in Russia at the time. The Revolution?

DE MERIT: Not necessarily. Not necessarily, in fact, her youngest son in 1918, during the, uh, World War One when they were conscripting soldiers for the army, decided to leave America and went back to Russia and he got killed in the pogroms in Russia. My youngest uncle was killed prior to my coming to America. I left shortly after the 1918 Revolution.

APPEL: And how did you feel about coming to America?

DE MERIT: Not very good. Not very good. I heard many stories of gold on the streets and the all, uh, opportunities in America and all the wealth in America. But that didn't entice me too much. I was more or less interested in educating myself. And, uh, finding status on my own.

APPEL: Was your family adversely affected by the Revolution?

DE MERIT: Yes. Yes, very much. Uh, thirty people in all had perished in my own family. My immediate family. Thirty people. I remember them being marched down the streets by bandits and they were slaughtered. The only one that survived was a woman there. All the rest they killed off.

APPEL: And your father and your mother.

DE MERIT: No he, she escaped. He luckily escaped. He perished in uh, World War Two. During Hit, the Hitlarian invasion of, uh, of Kiev. He perished with my mother and they are buried in a mass grave at, uh, Bobby Yarim at Kiev. There was about 50,000 people were slaughtered.

APPEL: Yeah. But your, you were being asked to leave your family, your friends.

DE MERIT: Yes, my, uh, parents didn't object to it because they thought unlimited opportunities, that if I arrived here shortly after that they would be able to immigrate too. But there were other handicaps. Uh, Hitler came in about the time when I was able to send for them and they were not able to leave anymore.

APPEL: Uh-huh. And how were the arrangements made for you to leave? How did you manage to leave Russia?

DE MERIT: In order to, uh, depart from Russia, we had to pay agents money to smuggle us from Russia into Poland, which borders on Russia. I think they, we paid \$400 for my sister and I. And these agents had a group of about 40 people going through forests, swamps, with the knowledge of sentries who were shooting in the air to make off that they were pursuing someone. They were paid off in advance. And these agents, I found later, took the money that they earned from smuggling people, bought dope in Poland which they brought back to Russia and sold for gold. The dope was used medicinally, not for addicts.

APPEL: How long did that, uh, travel to Poland take?

DE MERIT: Approximately four days. Four days. We went by train

to the border of Poland. From there we took a train into a little town called Rovknov in Poland which used to be Russia at one time. And, uh, we stayed in this town for about sixty days and went to Warsaw, to the capitol of Poland. From there arrangements with the HIAS, H-I-A-S, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which my people here had pre-arranged beforehand.

APPEL: I see, no. I was asking about the, it sounds very dramatic, the idea of being smuggled across the border. Do you remember what that was like?

DE MERIT: Very vividly. For want of water we stooped down before a creek that was full of dirt and disease and we had to get on our hands and knees to drink the water because there's no other water, water available. And it was, uh, very scary going through this forest. Knowing that sentries were shooting and not knowing whether they were shooting at us or imaginary escapees.

APPEL: And were you and your sister, were there other people from your town that was in this group of people?

DE MERIT: No, we were just the two of us. The rest were people from all over. From all over. All over Russia. Every part of Russia.

APPEL: And who were the people in that group? Were they primarily Russian Jews?

DE MERIT: Yes. A hundred percent Jewish. One hundred percent Jewish. There's anti-semitism has flourished in Russia from time immemorial. Even during the Czar, there was anti-semitism. Especially in the Ukraine and parts around there, anti-semitism was at it's height. Maybe that's the reason I identify myself with other nationalities. I, I can be, Italian or a Jew or a Russian or anything because to me all people are the same and, uh, my lack of ability to understand that, uh, there was hatred, uh, couldn't reach my soul because I, I thought all people were alike.

APPEL: So, when you got across into Poland, that's when you were in Rovknov? And from there you took a train to  
Warsaw?

DE MERIT: Warsaw. Already under an assumed identities. We could not stay in Poland also. We had to assume identities of kids our, almost our own age, using their passports and their names and able to travel to Warsaw from there.

APPEL: And they were Polish children?

DE MERIT: Yes.

APPEL: Who you were.

DE MERIT: These agents, uh--

APPEL: Had arranged it.

DE MERIT: Made these, all these arrangements for, for a stipend.

APPEL: And how long did you stay in Warsaw?

DE MERIT: One year.

APPEL: One year.

DE MERIT: And that one year I picked up the language thoroughly. In order to stay and assume the Pole, I, I had to learn very rapidly. Idioms and words to pass as a,uh, Pole.

APPEL: And what were your living conditions there?

DE MERIT: We lived in a place that was also pre-arranged by this

HIAS organization, with another family. They, uh, weekly sums for our stay there. And the reason we had to stay an entire year to await a vis from America. See Russian, Russia had no consular offices, Poland did. Warsaw had a consular office at that time. That's why all these emigres went to--

APPEL: Through Poland.

DE MERIT: Through Poland.

APPEL: How did you spend that year? What did you do?

DE MERIT: Libraries. (He laughs.) This is a fact. Daily. Daily trips to the library. Reading an awful lot.

APPEL: What did you read?

DE MERIT: Uh, philosophy. Science fiction. (He laughs.)

APPEL: You were thirteen years old.

DE MERIT: Yes. Yes. I've dealt with philosophy since I was about six or seven years old. I read Schopenhauer at seven in the original German. I read the, uh, all

the philosophers, Plato and Socrates and the Latin, which I had to learn in Russian before I was able to graduate to high school in Russia. You must have Greek, Latin and German.

APPEL: But you graduated high school at age thirteen.

DE MERIT: Thirteen. I was a precocious child. (He laughs.)

APPEL: Very precocious.

DE MERIT: And the equivalent, the, uh, Russian high school is equivalent to two years of college in America. Because you had to have geometry and trigonometry before you graduate high school

APPEL: Do you remember how you felt during that year?

DE MERIT: Uh. Very forlorn. Away from parents. And anticipating meeting, uh, new faces that I hadn't seen in ages. That's why I spent all my time reading and in the library because I didn't play with kids my age, because I was too old for them. (He laughs.)

APPEL: Did you have any expectations or ideas what America was going to be like?

DE MERIT: Oh yes. Very much so. I did quite a bit of reading on the subject.

APPEL: And what did you--

DE MERIT: See I picked up English during that year in Poland. Sufficient English to be able to converse a little. And read, read quite a bit about the history of america. And the, uh, conglomeration of people from all over the world that sought the same refuge that I was seeking.

APPEL: And what did you expect?

DE MERIT: I expected to accomplish what I had. (He laughs.)

APPEL: In terms of--

DE MERIT: I expected to go to school. Which I did. On my own. Paid my way through college. Although I had other expectations, I joined the Army, U.S. Army at seventeen. With the hope of getting into West Point. I was told I could get a \$100,000 education for nothing. And the

congressman urged me to join the forces he says, "I can't give you a, uh, underwriting for West Point because I'm already filled up." I joined the United States Army with the hope of getting into West Point. Although I was born flatfooted, with a hip deformity, a spinal deformity, they took me into the army because I was insistent on getting in. They asked me to run back and forth on my toes. It was a hardship but I did it, just to get in the army. (He laughs.) When I got into the service, within six months, I was in officer's school

APPEL: I'm going to go back just a little bit so that we keep the chronology of your coming to America. After this year in Warsaw, uh, then what happened? How did you arrange to, to come to America?

DE MERIT: We got our papers at New York City at the, uh, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and they picked us up from Ellis Island. And brought us to New York City.

APPEL: Yeah. But how did, what ship did you take? Where did you leave from?

DE MERIT: The ship. Uh, from, uh, Poland. We took to New York City, the Baltic America Line. The name of the ship was the Estonia. When we got to, uh--

APPEL: What port did you leave from?

DE MERIT: From, uh, Danzig.

APPEL: From Danzig.

DE MERIT: It was a (?) that means a free city. And it was divided between Poland and Germany, accessible to either one of them. At the present, it's under Polish rule, or under Russian rule I should say. We took a small boat from Danzig to, uh, to the ship. And we boarded the ship, we spent, uh, fully six days aboard the ship before we arrive in New York City.

APPEL: What was the ship like? What was the passage like?

DE MERIT: Passage, we were, we had a better passage than people in first class. We were in third class. The people in first class were on the top where the sway of the boat is more noticeable and the, in the hole is even better than third class. And my sister and I had bunks, uh, top and bottom bunks. The food was very good. I

became addicted to fish. (He laughs.) We had fish daily and I ate my fill of fish. My wife will tell ya that I'm a voluble consumer of fish at the present time.

Uh, when we reached New York City we were taken by a small boat to Ellis Island from the large ship. When we got off at Ellis Island, of course the sight of the Statue of Liberty makes you feel kind of saved from the clutches of tyranny. At ellis Island we were caged immediately.

APPEL: What do you mean caged?

DE MERIT: We were in cages like animals. Everybody.

APPEL: Can you just tell me a little bit more about that?

DE MERIT: They had cages for, uh, males and females. For different ethnic groups. Because the, uh, there were thousands of people there. The volume was unbelievable. The amount of people that came to Ellis Island. And after standing in the cage for several hours, I called the man over and in English I told him, "I don't like to be here." He said, "How come you speak English?" I told him that I had picked up the language and I says, "I don't like the fact that my sister's in a different cage and

I can't, I don't even see her, I can't, can't find her and I'm very worried about it because I am the eldest of the party." And he got me out of the cage when he found out I spoke English and in fact I helped them with different emigres to question them, because their knowledge of the language was superficial, I think. They weren't too conversant in whatever language they did speak. And I helped them very much in that respect.

APPEL: What kind of questions did you ask, were you asked to ask other people?

DE MERIT: Well I asked the extent of their education, their age, their names. Uh, who, who they were going to, if they had any prospect of a job, or if they had money on them. You had to have a certain allocated amount on your person before, uh, being able to leave Ellis Island. Uh, I think I had \$25 or \$30 on me. Although they overlooked, they never asked me if I had any money at all. They overlooked that fact.

APPEL: And the, these cages, were they individual cages, one person--

DE MERIT: No, no, no, no, no, uh, a room holding twenty, thirty people. They were not cages in the sense, they were segregated--

APPEL: They were rooms that were closed.

DE MERIT: Yes. Because there was people milling around outside and, uh, you had to have the FBI there, there was no FBI at that time to distinguish one person from another, so they caged you to identify you as an immigrant. I think there was no intent to hurt anybody. I remember too well these people who were officers questioning people. They were dressed in uniforms and they were reminiscent of the Keystone Cop days. (He laughs.)

APPEL: In that they were funny or comic?

DE MERIT: Yeah, well their uniforms was comic. Their attire was comic.

APPEL: And do you remember the, uh, examinations. Being examined, being questioned, yourself?

DE MERIT: Well they had, they had tables with, uh, six or eight examiners at each table with chairs for the, uh, person they examined. And the, each one used different tongues. They were all using different languages to question the people. Their greatest concern was for people that had disease, or disabilities or illiterates. Total illiterates. I,

uh, examined one person who was able to write in Yiddish only. And, uh, I had to ascertain that it was Yiddish, but he confidently told me that's the only thing he can write is his name. Nothing else. (He laughs.)

APPEL: So what did you say?

DE MERIT: I told him he was literate enough. I, I had to work along with the guy. (He laughs.)

APPEL: How long were you actually on Ellis Island?

DE MERIT: Uh, six days, exactly. Six days.

APPEL: Do you know why you were held for six days?

DE MERIT: Yeah. Yes, I certainly do. Because my family here had certain problems. They had problems raising additional money. Like \$40, \$50 for out train transportation from New York City to Chicago. And they took time to collect that money. I found that out later.

APPEL: And what, what, how did you spend those six days?

DE MERIT: Uh, with these examiners. Sitting with them and talking

to these various people. There was no reading material. I spent time, uh, I ate in the same lunch room that they did, I didn't eat with the other immigrants who were handling, handed their fare through the, uh, bars. They handed you a plate of something or other. But I ate in their lunch room and I was able to converse with some of them and I was happy at the occasion of being able to, uh, pick up additional words that I had not known before.

APPEL: Uh, the experience doesn't sound like it was frightening, it's not--

DE MERIT: No, it wasn't. I was never frightened. I faced death so many times in Russia during the Revolution, almost at the point of getting killed and it didn't frighten me then because it was something I, it was inevitable. It was inevitable. Nor to this day my wife will attest to the fact I don't frighten at anything. I look hopefully at everything.

APPEL: I, I'm interested in that just because of the historical aspect of it. What happened in your town during the Revolution that was--

DE MERIT: In my town, almost every Jew was killed. My father escaped, they told him to stop or they'll kill him. And he didn't stop, he hid in a haystack about thirty feet high. Got into the haystack and, uh, there were rumors that a, a, uh, Red Army detachment was headed for our village. And these bandits had to get out rapidly so they took a thirty hostages or thirty one hostages and departed. They had no time to look for my father in the haystack. That's how he escaped getting killed. And the, the reason I'm alive right now, my mother, we lived in a home with an icon, that Jews don't display. It was a religious icon. And she crossed herself, although she was Jewish, and she spoke Russian fluently and she said she wasn't Jewish. Although they found a Jewish book. I remember the book was a prayer book with a silver or golden covers, the rim of it was silver or gold, very expensive, and she told them that was museum piece that somebody handed her. And they called her a dirty name, that she was a Jewess, but he says, "We'll let you go." They had no time to disqualify her statement that she wasn't a Jew. That was how we escaped.

APPEL: And were you being threatened by the bandits or by the Red Army or both?

DE MERIT: No, the Red Army, at that time came as liberators. It was a different Red Army than you have today. Much different Red Army. When the communism made its entry in Russia it was in the guise of a

democratic government. I remember Kerensky was the head of, was the President, the head of the government at that time. And it was a fairly decent government, they allowed, uh, ownership of land. It was only a little later on that the communist regime of the present date had taken the land and everything. My father had thousands of acres of land. He had these three mills. They disappropriated him from everything. They took everything away from him and they gave him a job as a janitor in an office building that he owned.

APPEL: So you were escaping, it sounds like, more the historic and traditional anti-semitism than, than the communist regime.

DE MERIT: No, we didn't escape from communism. I say I may have wound up to be commissar, because I was a member of the Young Communist League. Oh, when I left Russia it was a different kind of communism.

APPEL: Going back now to Ellis Island, oh, what was happening to your sister during those six days?

DE MERIT: She was caged. She was still caged. Although I was ,was able to speak to her daily. I was able to bring her a bar of candy or other goodies, a piece of cake that she enjoyed, but she still was caged until we left.

APPEL: And how did that occur?

DE MERIT: When we left, uh, a man came up to me and told me that they got the necessary papers for our departure, and we left for New York City then. And instead of going to the, the train station, we went to another home, it was run by the HIAS, it was a hospice house for immigrants where we had to await the tickets for the train. And we were there for a couple of days and we left for Chicago, Illinois.

APPEL: Was, did that seem like a welcoming experience, being with HIAS?

DE MERIT: Yes, very much so. I contribute to that organization to this day. I have for many years, since I've been in America. I've helped them because they've helped other people. I have a recent arrival here. Seven years ago, my nephew that I brought here personally from Russia, my sister's son. I deposited, uh, \$5,000 with the HIAS for his sustenance for a six month period. And this man is a very wealthy man today, seven years after he came to America. He owns his own home, he does, uh, he works for a hospital here as a

carpenter, cabinet maker. He's got, uh, a taxi cab that he leases out seven days a week. And he does photography work, floral arrangements on the side, to make money.

APPEL: Uh, so then you got on a train to go to Chicago. And did you have any impressions of this new country?

DE MERIT: Very much so. When I came to New York the sight of the buildings in New York were so impressive that I, uh, I thought that everything that I read was not exaggerated at all. I thought everything was exaggerated. But the, uh, colossal size of these buildings was enough to impress me that I was in the right country and I'd be part of the scene.

APPEL: And the train trip, was that eventful?

DE MERIT: Not very much. I think we slept most of the time. When we came to Chicago, we had a group of about 35, 40 people that met us at the train, family. (He laughs.) And, uh, I believe, uh, for the next 12, 15 hours we were awake answering questions from the different people.

APPEL: What were they asking?

DE MERIT: About the, the other family, they left a huge family behind. We still have, uh, maybe, 40, 50 people alive in Russia to this day. I have a sister coming here within the next week or so, this nephew's mother. After seven years of trying, I finally succeeded in getting her out of there with a daughter, a husband and two sons. But I still have another sister that I can't possibly bring because they work for the military. Her children work for the military. They were not permitted to leave.

APPEL: And can you tell me a little about your adjustment to life in Chicago.

DE MERIT: In Chicago. I arrived here a day before Christmas. I had a holiday from Christmas to January 2nd. The second, I went to work, they found me a job. (He laughs.) Before school and after school.

APPEL: What was the job?

DE MERIT: The job was delivering rolls, fresh rolls and bagels. (He laughs.) And, uh, other breakfast necessities and bottle of milk. And my school, I was, I entered the sixth grade. Although I was a high school graduate from Russia. I entered the sixth grade which I made, uh, into high

school within six months. (He laughs.) Because I had knowledge of geography, history, and mathematics, thoroughly. But the experience in Chicago, I made many friends though this delivery service. People that liked me very much for my being so new and so acclimated to the country. I met people who were willing to do anything in the world for me. A shoemaker gave me new shoes. A clothing man gave me a new suit of clothes because he liked my ambitions.

APPEL: We're going to break here so we can turn the tape over.

This is the end of the first side of the tape of the interview with Ivan De Merit.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

APPEL: This is the beginning of the second side of the interview with Ivan De Merit. You were telling me about your adjustment to life in Chicago.

DE MERIT: Chicago is a very, very lively town, full of many sided views. I found corruption of Chicago which is extensive to this very day. I found a little anti-semitism in Chicago. I used to frequent the park , Old Humboldt Park. When you entered the park there was a statue of

Koskiusko. General Koskiusko, Polish General who served in the American forces, and when you enter the park there was a commixture of Poles, Jews, Russians, almost every nationality is represented. I had a policeman, I was riding on a bicycle and a policeman told me I was a dirty kike, which is a slur for a Jew. I took his badge and reported him. He lost his job for thirty days. (He laughs.) I was, I wasn't going to take anything from anybody. I knew what I was in America and I had an open voice and I could speak. And I, I seldom acquiesced to anything like that. Humboldt, Humboldt Park was a haven, a haven for most of these emigres. It had a lagoon with boats. It had a park for picnicking. It had a lot of features that accommodated the diversity of people from around the world. I also made friends with, uh, young people who had the same learning that I had, who went to school with me, who had aspirations that I had. And some of these people became rather great people in the world today.

APPEL: They were also immigrants.

DE MERIT: Yes, yes. Very much so. But they had dreams, they had aspirations.

APPEL: What were your dreams and aspirations?

DE MERIT: My, uh, my greatest dream was to become an engineer.

And, uh, practice certain ideas that I had in my mind, but that was dwarfed by anti-semitism. In my last year of college, I worked for a printing press machinery company in Chicago, who manufactured newspaper presses. Started there as an errand boy, worked in the blueprint room, worked on the drafting board, finally became an engineer. As a gentile, not as a Jew. I was forewarned that if I was Jew I could not get the job. So that's where Ivan, my name was Irving Maritsky. I took the "-sky" off, well I did that in the army because "-ski" means of and "-di" means of. It's not "minus merit" it's "with merit" or "of merit". So I made it De Merit, Ivan Guy De Merit. Because Guy de Maupassant was one of my favorite writers. And I assumed his Guy, is, but I, uh, was cautioned by my grandmother that if I didn't take off Yom Kippur, I could leave the house. So to satisfy her I phoned in sick, at the company that I worked for and, uh, came back the next day after Yom Kippur

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better than the other, then I have none myself. Because I know different religions. Because we all believe in the same deity. And if he is the deity of all us, then all religions are aiming at the same summit.

APPEL: It, just going back to that, could you describe a little bit more about the kind of anti-semitism and the events in Russia that precipitated your leaving for America

DE MERIT: Anti-semitism in Russia goes back to pre-Czarist days. Long, long before that. If you had seen this picture on TV, Peter the Great, it went back as far as that. Although in the picture there's little, uh, scene of a man who wanted to marry a gentile and Peter said, "Well wasn't our, uh, God also a Jew?" He tried to slough off the matter of anti-semitism. But it goes back a long time, long time. It may be due to the fact that the Jew was aggressive, ambitious. I won't say that there, there aren't any faults. At one time I told my father that they'll be killing Jews prior to the time they were killing Jews.

APPEL: This was approximately what year?

DE MERIT: Uh, about 1917. He had a little trap in the grain mill that entrapped a pound or so of flour from every person's grain. Every person brought their, all farmers, he had a yard where maybe 40, 50 wagons were able to park, bring their loads of grain, 400 bags of grain that he milled into flour. And he had a little trap that he stole from each one of

them a little sum. Well, whether he did it because he was a Jew, I doubt it. I imagine everybody else did the very same thing. He didn't learn it from his own mind. He got it from other people that did the same thing. And I warned him that people would kill Jews because this is being done by a Jew. I thought that Jews were exemplary people. That they were supposed to show the rest of the world the way to God. And, uh, this may have led to anti-semitism, but I think the biggest, uh, fault is that they were aggressive. They wanted to educate their children. They prospered either in banking or in the sciences and arts. Or the gentile in Russia became, remained a farmer for all of his life. They were doomed to their land. At the time when Russia was emerging from the old czars, most of Russia was occupied by Poles, because Poland was occupied, was, uh, under Russian domination for centuries. And these Polish lords made their farmers slaves, they were serfs on their farms. And by degrees they gave them little plots of land for, uh, their stipend. And that, I think, is a bigger cause of anti-semitism than anything else.

APPEL: When you were talking about the bandits who came in and murdered people in your town, uh, were they taking advantage of the chaos created by the Revolution?

DE MERIT: Yes. Exactly. Because some of the bandits were soldiers in the Czarist army. The only ammunition they were able

to get when they disbanded the, uh, Russian army, when they were freed from the German front, they came back home with their rifles, their bayonets, they didn't take it away from them. And a lot of them became bandits. Because, uh, looting was a common place thing. The reason for banditry in Russia now is the reason for our, uh, crime wave at the present time. Unemployment at an opportune time and there was no government, no government to supervise or to, uh, stop them. And, uh, the bandits went out to loot primarily, to kill if necessary. They didn't kill because we were Jews, they killed because, because they weren't able to, uh, expropriate the Jew from his property, and killed him as a last resort.

APPEL: Uh, so what, can you tell me approximately the years and just a little bit historically about what happened?

DE MERIT: I can go back as far as 1914. The very start of the, uh, First World War. Russia was engaged on its own fronts at that time. And they were doing very badly. The army was not functioning too well. And, uh, when, when I look back, the, uh, Russian farmer was in a, in a bad shape at that time. The, uh, harvest wasn't very good and, uh, the people were not, there was certain conscription into the army that didn't have the necessary labor, they were short on manpower. Which they are short to this very day, there's woman power, no man power. And, uh, I honestly believe that the state of Russia was born out of World War One when there was chaos.

They were circulated, they were circled by armies from every country in the world. France, Italy, Britain, America. I met American soldiers in Russia. In Vladivostok, the far end of Russia.

APPEL:       What happened to your own family and to your neighbors at that time?

DE MERIT:    They were devastated. I remember one morning I was sleeping on an oven. See in Russia they have ovens that they bake in you can also sleep on top of them. We were four of us kids on top of this oven seeking refuge and we heard commotion outside. There were, uh, uh, a bunch of bandits leading an uncle, two cousins, other people, I identified them by their voices, heard him screaming. They were tied with ropes to horses and they were whipping them. And they came to slaughter. And this is almost a commonplace thing. I seen people before my very eyes. I see people drop dead, slaughtered. I seen Polish, the Polish army of occupation got as far as Kiev. They started with an army of about 400 and raised an army of, uh, 25,000 to 30,000. They were able to occupy Kiev, Russia. The Polish army, under Admiral (?). I'll never forget his name. And, uh, I've seen a Polish soldier take his saber and get a hold of a beard and cut it off with a saber. You can imagine trying to cut a beard off with a saber. They pull out the beard rather than cut it. And I've seen an awful lot of slaughter. An awful lot of it. I was running around the streets with a kid brother

who is dead now, he was killed in Russia in World War Two. He was in the very front advance on Germany from the Russian side. He was killed the first month he served in the army. I've got a picture of him. And I took him around with me because he spoke Russian fluently and, uh, he had a pug nose and light, light hair and he was more gentile than I was so we were able to roam the streets without getting killed. I finally was estranged from my family. I took my brother and I, we left town. We wound up in a different town altogether.

APPEL:       When was this? Why did it happen?

DE MERIT:    The Russian Revolution. During the Russian Revolution, 1916. '17. I left town first, because my father had a big beard and unmistakably a Jew. He was praying in a corner and we told him the bandits are advancing, there's a bunch of them riding. They'll be here within 15, 20 minutes and he says he's going to continue praying. I took my kid brother and we left him. And we hadn't seen him for three months. We finally were reunited three months later, when everything quieted down.

APPLE:       That was when your father his in the haystack?

DE MERIT:    No, it was a different time altogether, was a different time altogether. I say there's so many things that happened it's

unbelievable, unbelievable. This is a different time altogether. I guess God gave him a few more years to live. He was 68 when he perished at Bobby Yarim, Kiev. He was 60 years old, 68 years old. He would be, about 100 right now. I think he'd still be living if it were not for accidental death or death by the will of another person. He had a strong will like I have. Very strong will. A very hard working man. (Doorbell rings.) That's my mechanic.

APPEL: Well it, it, you, it sounds like because of your own preciosity and because of the history that you lived through personally that you were very experienced for a child of 13 or 14.

DE MERIT: Yes. Very much so, very much so. I had a very groping mind. Very much so. Ever since I was a little boy. At the age of two and a half or three, I was sitting on the lap of a tutor who was tutoring me at that young age. At the age of four I knew three languages already. Which is hard to believe. I can't believe myself. But my memory goes back to the age of one. And I, I can confirm that with my grandmother, who's dead now. She's dead of quite a few years. But I told her different things. She says, "No one could have told you these things, they were too, too vivid and

things that were not supposed to be told to other people." That I told her. She says, "You do remember."

I did remember. I remember my grandfather and I was a little boy over one when he died, a little over one.

APPEL: This is the end of the interview with Ivan De Merit.