UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

ELLIS ISLAND ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Ebba Lewis

Interviewer: Nancy Dallett

Interview Number: 186

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DALLETT: My name is Nancy Dallett and I'm speaking with

Mrs. Ebba Lewis on Wednesday, June 4, 1986. We are beginning this interview at 3:40 p.m. and we are about to interview Mrs. Lewis about her immigration experience from Denmark in 1923. This is side one of interview number 186 . Can you take me back to the beginning of your story and tell me where and when you were born.

LEWIS I was born in Copenhagen, Denmark on February 16, 1915. And my father's family came from Copenhagen, and my mother's family came from a small town called Slagelse, which is S-l- a-g-e-l-s-e. And, my father was a seafaring man, so he wasn't at home very much, and mother lived by herself in a small apartment in Copenhagen. I have very vivid memories of my grandmother in her small town. They were a family of cabinet makers. My mother had three brothers and three sisters, and my father had three brothers and three sisters, so they both came from large families. My uncles went into the same business that my grandfather was in--they were cabinet makers, also. I have very vivid recollections about my grandmother. She was a very kind, gentle woman, and a very giving person. I remember the pot-bellied stove; I can remember her apartment, or her house really, very vividly. I can remember helping her when I was three years old or so, being fascinated with polishing this black pot-bellied stove, which they kept polished once a week. And I can remember geraniums in her kitchen window. They didn't have running hot water, in those days, and it was a great treat for my grandmother to come visit my mother in Copenhagen, because she lived in one of the first apartments that had running hot and cold water. And she had a stall shower, which was just unbelievable. Because my grandmother, and

even her children, went to bathhouses on Saturday night to take baths. There were no indoor toilets or indoor bathrooms in their homes. Even when they owned their own homes, there were none. And this was a fairly progressive country, but that's the way life was in 1915. I have very spotty memories up until about the age of three, three-and-a-half, but in November of 1918, when I was really almost four, my father got the captaincy of his own ship. And we were to meet him here in New York. He was going to take command of his ship here in New York. And, I of course don't remember the name of the commercial ship that we came over on at that time. But I do remember mother telling me that we were not able to sail at night because the water was mined, and they were afraid, you know, that they would not be able to see the mines at night. So we didn't sail at night; we would only sail in the daytime. And it took us almost sixteen days to cross the Atlantic, that time. And that was with a steam vessel, that wasn't a sailing vessel. I can remember arriving in New York--I think I told you that the Armistice was signed while we were out to sea, in November. And when we arrived here, the influenza epidemic was at a great height here in New York, actually all over the world. And people wore masks to keep them from getting infected from other people from the influenza virus. And I can remember people standing on the dock with these white masks on. And because the Armistice had been signed so recently, there were hordes of soldiers, with bayonetted rifles standing on the docks. And I think the reason I remember this so vividly is because it was a very traumatic experience to come to this land, where people had guns and greeted you with guns. And the white masks I probably did not quite comprehend, even though it was explained to me. It was just, you know, a mystery, that people walked around

that way. We spent Christmas here in New York, before we sailed from New York. And I can remember my uncle taking me to the five-and-ten cent store. And i can remember getting lost in the crowd. Denmark is a small country, and you go into a store--there are just not crowds of people the way there would be in a Woolworth here in New York. And I can remember getting lost. And of course not being able to speak the language, it was panic. And of course, he finally found me, and everything was just fine. But I know that most of my memories up until five, six years old, and i'm not so sure this isn't true of most people, although I shouldn't say that--that they are traumatic experiences that we remember. I think the gentler experiences don't come until later. We sailed from New York in January, and my father was captain of the three-and-a-half master (Bark). It was a sailing ship. And it might interest you people that the Peking, if you've ever seen it, down at the South Street Seaport, is an exact twin to the ship that I was on. And I just took my friend aboard recently. And I was so excited at the experience. And I said "Well, this is where I slept"; " This is where my room was"; "This is where our dining room was"; "And there were just four of in the family; my sister, my father, mother and myself". And because we were two little girls, and there was a crew of thirty-some-odd on the ship, which were a pretty rough bunch, which seamen were in those days, and my father, I suppose, had to be very careful with these two little girls. We'd be out on this long voyage, and there was a dividing line past which we were not allowed to go and the sailors were not allowed to cross, just an imaginary line kept us separated. And, as I told you, it took us ninety days--our first stop was Sydney, Australia. And it took us ninety

days to sail from New York to Sydney, Australia.

DALLETT: When you first came in to New York, since the purpose was to meet up with your and sail with his ship, did you have to come through Ellis Island then?

LEWIS: No. Simply because we were not staying here permanently. We were only going to be here for a month or maybe less. I really don't remember the time involved. I am only imagining that's the why we didn't go through Ellis Island.

DALLETT: Do you know where you would have docked, and embarked on the ship with your father?

LEWIS: In Brooklyn. When we came over the second time, in 1923, we docked in Hoboken. I remember that very well.

DALLETT: Okay. You're on your way to Australia--

LEWIS: Australia, right. And, well, I must have turned four, I guess, while we were on that trip. On that voyage. And I can remember my father setting up kind of a school system--my sister was fourteen months older than I am--and I can remember my father and mother teaching us how to read and teaching us to write. And we had kind of the basic education. And I also remember--I don't know what they call the Germanic script today--is there a name for it, are you familiar with it at all? Well, there is a kind of Germanic- it's very elaborate script, that our hymn books

were written in this script. And I can remember not only learning the normal characters in the alphabet, but also having to learn this elaborate script that the hymn books were printed in at that time. So we did get a basic education on board. And I can remember Sydney very well, insofar as I remember the beautiful beaches. I can remember my father renting a touring car and we took a ride up into the blue mountains. He had never driven a car in his life; licenses weren't required. You just got in the car and you drove. That was it. And we, the Danish Consulate entertained us there a lot. And I can remember mother going to her first opera, and getting all decked for it. And Caruso was singing there, in Sydney, Australia. I can still remember that she heard Il Travatore and she sang the arias from that thing after we went back on the ship for months. And we had a record player on board--when I say a record player, it's the kind that you cranked with the big horn that you see--pictures of RCA Victor. And I can remember my father teaching me how to dance to the tune of the Missouri Waltz, which we had a recording of. We also had a piano on board. And my mother taught us very simple things on the piano.

DALLETT: Was it an American crew, or a Danish crew?

LEWIS: It was a mixed crew, but a motley crew. There were Chinese, there were everything, whatever you could sign on board, that would do this kind of work. You would hire it. You came to a dock and whatever was available, you took. I remember that our steward was Chinese, that's why I happen to mention the word "Chinese." And he cooked. And mother, of course, tried very hard to teach him the Danish things that

she cooked. There was a language barrier. And I can remember he was not too cooperative about the whole thing. I can remember mother telling me a story that he purposely broke a glass simply to annoy her. Evidently, they didn't get along very well. Whether this is apocryphal or not, I don't know. I really don't know.

DALLETT: The captain of this vessel was your father. Did he pick up other languages? Which languages?

LEWIS: Yes. Well, the one that he had the most use of was English, because most places where you went, people did speak English. So that he did know some German, also. But English served him fairly well in most countries that he went to. Most of the people that he dealt with were fairly educated people, so that he--I don't know how he managed, to tell you the truth, with the crew. As I say, they were not Danish and they were not English. They were just a mixture. Maybe crews also learned English, because there had to be a common language there, somewhere, that people could deal with. So that might very well be.

DALLETT: Did you, in turn, pick up some English then?

LEWIS: Not really, not really, not when I was little. I would like to say that we did, but we didn't. When I came to the United States in 1923 I really didn't know a word of English. Mother and father had learned it in school. They had a very elementary--mother especially had a very elementary English education. It was a required language, that if you went--I think even in grade school, they started

teaching you English. She went through high school, which is as far as she went in her schooling. And, so mother did have a smattering of English when we came to the United States.

DALLETT: So, in every port you would pick up merchandise of some sort and--

LEWIS: Exactly. For instance, we went from Sydney, we went to Marseilles, France. I don't remember what cargo we carried, but, you know whatever they needed to have transported and, oh, we were in South America. We were really all over the world, carrying--it was purely a cargo ship. Talking about Marseilles, I remember that we--the boat became infested with rats, because of some particular cargo that we had carried. And I remember having to live off the ship for three or four days. They completely sealed the ship. And fumigated it. It was the only way--this was a problem with most ships in those days, that they had to contend with. We spent Christmas in Marseilles. I remember that simply because they don't exchange gifts on Christmas Day, the way the do in Denmark and the United States. Whatever the twelfth day of Christmas is, I can't remember what it's called in English, even, we were not a very religious family. Whatever it is, we exchanged--and we were so fortunate, because we arrived in France when they were celebrating this type of Christmas, so that--I still have the doll that I received in France as a Christmas

present. I'm trying to think what else would interest you about the voyages. Of course, I could remember my father with the sextant, which was the only way you navigated in those days, was reading the stars. There was no other way to sail. And, it still boggles my mind that anybody could get anyplace so directly, being able to do that. Oh, crossing the equator was fun. They have a--what is the word--something becomes established by repetition--there is word I'm looking for--anyway, that when you cross the equator, you're baptized by Neptune. And they make a great deal out of it. One of the seamen got dressed up as Neptune, with the beard and the fork and the whole thing, you know, and they literally dunked us in a tub of water after we crossed- -as we crossed the equator. And I understand that this is something that they do to this day, if you sail across the equator.

DALLETT: So it's like an international sailing tradition, or--

LEWIS: A tradition, that's the word I was looking for. Yes, it's an international sailing tradition. A nd of course, today they let you get into a swim suit, and they use a pool. It's not quite the way it was--they took buckets of water and just splashed buckets of water over us. I remember mother had a print dress on, and she was upset because all the colors ran, when they dunked this water over her. But I don't know--through all my moves, it's gotten lost, but they gave us a certificate, a christening certificate, saying on such-and-such a day at such-and-such a time we have crossed the equator, and forever on we were

allowed to cross the equator without having to go through this ritual again. So that I remember quite vividly. And it was a fun thing, really. He actually--they had lowered him over the side of the ship. We were out in the middle of the ocean. And Neptune came up on a ladder over the side of a ship, and you know, they made it very dramatic, really.

DALLETT: Did they tell you this was going to happen? You mean he just appeared.

LEWIS: Oh, no. He just appeared one--I think mother would have dressed for it if she had known it was going to happen. I Have a feeling she probably wasn't very happy with my dad that day. But anyway, it was--

DALLETT: A real rite of passage--

LEWIS: It was a rite of passage, is right. And actually, I remember ,mostly pleasant things, until the time when we were ship-wrecked. I think I told you we were ship-wrecked off the Orkney Islands. And it must have been a hurricane, because my father talked about waves a hundred feet high, and he was not prone to exaggeration, so I really believe that what he said was true. And we lost a mast overboard. We lost a man. We lost a lifeboat. And I don't remember being tremendously frightened. Mother must have had a very- -even though I'm sure, she must have been frightened--a great desire to calm us, so that we wouldn't be upset about it. Because I can remember her saying that as long as dad was on the bridge, that there was nothing to worry about.

And I can remember later, years later, that she said that he went forty-eight hours without sleep, that he was up on that deck for forty-eight hours. Eventually we were saved by a Scottish fishing vessel. The ship was lost, but they did tow it, hoping to salvage it, which they never did. And we were brought to Edinburgh, in Scotland, from--towed there. And that must have been in 1922. And my father had never fulfilled his stint in the army. They required one year's conscription in the army at that time. I don't know if Denmark has conscription today. And he had never fulfilled it, because being a seafaring man, he wasn't required to. But having lost the ship, steam had now come in. And my father would have had to go back to school, and become licensed for a steamship, which would have taken a couple of years. And he just wasn't about to do it.

DALLETT: So, you were out on the water for four years, then?

LEWIS: Almost four years. Yes.

DALLETT: In the meantime, steam--

LEWIS: Well, it was actually 1919. We arrived here in the end of 1918, it was 1919 or '20--it was three years-and-a-half years, really, that we were on the water. Most of the time, we'd come back to Denmark occasionally, because the ship brought us back there for one reason or another, but, by and large, that was our home. And in retrospect, I think it's very interesting, because whatever your live is a child, this is a personal opinion of my own, it's not scientific

at all, it has nothing to do with scientific research, I feel that whatever we experience as a child, we feel that that is normal, and this is the way everybody else in the world lives. As a small child, I just took it for granted that--I don't remember missing playmates, or--which was a deprivation, in a way. Because most of the people we saw were adults. We didn't have a child's world, in those very important years. We lived in an adult world. We were expected to behave like adults. And it was really--you would have thought that it would have been difficult, but it wasn't. That's the way life was, and that's the way you lived, and that was okay. Because, we also had a tremendous amount of security because mother and dad were always around. So that followed. And after the shipwreck, my father--we went back to Denmark, and then my father took a job as first mate, or whatever it was, on a ship and came to the United States through Canada. We were still in Denmark at this time, because, of course, we couldn't go with him. And--I hope you young people ask your mothers and fathers more questions than I asked mine. After they're gone , you always say, "Well, I wished I'd asked them this," "I wish I'd asked them this," you know. Why my father decided to stay in the United States, I don't know. I really don't know. I wish I did know. I know it had--he couldn't return to Denmark, that much I know. Unless he, you know, joined the army, which he was not about to do. He did have a younger sister here, who lived in Brooklyn. And her husband was a house painter.

DALLETT: That's good enough reason to me.

LEWIS: I know. The crash came in 1923. That was in October 1923,

when the crash came. Now he may have not had an intention of staying here permanently. But economic conditions became so bad that he probably took any kind of work he could get, because that was the beginning of the Depression. In any event, coming over on the ship, we came about, I don't remember, six months or a year or so after my father was here. When he saved up enough money to send the passage for us.

DALLETT: When he left Denmark, this time, he was just simply taking a job, is that right?

LEWIS: Any job, just to get money together so we could all be together. And as I say, he took a house painter's job, and he became very good at it, and worked with my uncle. I don't think for more than six months or a year before he took off on his own and worked for himself.

DALLETT: Do you know how your mother felt about--when your father, I assume, suggested she come to join him in this country?

LEWIS: Well, she--she was very anxious to be with him. My mother and father separated later, and I know that she loved that man till the day she died. It was really a heartbreak for her when they broke up. But she wanted to be with him, so that she would have done anything to be here. It didn't--she gad no--I think it bothered her, leaving her mother, because her mother was getting older at that time. And I can remember very well, we were staying at a hotel near the railroad station where we would take a train to the boat. And my grandmother came and visited us for a couple of days

at the hotel. And I can remember my--I can see like it was yesterday--my mother and grandmother had agreed that my grandmother was going to take the train back to the small town from Copenhagen where she lived. And mother and she, my grandmother had decided that it would be just too emotional and too upsetting for mother to see her off at a train. I think she probably had the feeling she might never see her again. So she told--they had made the arrangements- -she told my grandmother to leave, and they would say goodbye at the hotel. I can remember mother looking out the window and I can see my grandmother's back to this day. She was a small woman and she walked towards the railroad station. And my mother, very quickly, got the two of us into our coats or whatever, and sent us after grandma, and said, "I can't go, but you two go see grandma to the train." She just--somehow, this lonely figure walking down the street, you know it was just too much for her. So it must have been--it was difficult for her to leave, leaving her family, and we were the only ones except my father's sister that ever came to the United States. So that part of it must have been difficult. But the voyage across was very pleasant. I don't know why; one of the few things that I remember is this little girl that was quite nasty. Somewhere along the line, the first English words I can remember from anybody, she said, "I/m mad at you." Now it could be that I had done something very unkind; I really don't know. But it's amazing that I can remember the words, because those are not easy words to remember. So she must have shouted them at me. She was probably annoyed with me because I couldn't understand what she was saying, which

might have had something to do with it. But the voyage itself was very pleasant. The weather was lovely, it was August, and in those days they had three classes. They had first class. second class, and steerage. And we traveled second class. And it was just a lark, and we were going to see dad, which was exciting, and we didn't have the same emotional feeling about leaving Denmark that my mother did. So the whole thing was a very happy experience.

DALLETT: Was it a very different kind of trip than the ones you had been on--the sailboats?

LEWIS: Oh, yes, because, first of all, it was a huge boat, comparatively, to my small eyes, it was a huge boat. It probably wasn't. I remember it had two smokestacks, so that in itself--was a large ship.

DALLETT: Which boat was It?

LEWIS: I can't pronounce it right. Kristiana. K-r-i-s-t-i-a-n-i-a. And now I found it; I'm going to write to the Danish Consulate, and find out what registry that was, whether it was a Norwegian or a Swedish or a Danish-- I'm just curious, for my own sake. If I get too wordy, let me know.

DALLETT: No--this is terrific.

LEWIS: Are you sure?

DALLETT: Yeah, I just want to flip this tape over. That's the

END OD SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

DALLETT: This is the beginning of side two of interview number 186 with Ebba Lewis. You were just in the middle of telling me how this was a different trip, when you were coming to this country, as opposed to sailing around the world.

LEWIS: Well, it was very different, because it was my first experience in traveling on steamboat. And of course, there was no worry about being becalmed, or whether the sails had to be changed this way or the other way, and to a young child, this was very exciting. The ship just went! And we were with large groups of people, and we were waited on, and to me, it seemed quite elegant, the waiters fussing over us. And the food being very special, and so on and so forth. I remember very vividly--the captain must have had a dinner, both for first class and--I don't know if they called it second class or tourist--I can remember the captain showing up at the farewell dinner, and it was all very festive. But there was nothing--there were no highlights of the trip that I can remember, except it was just a very pleasant experience and we were very excited at the idea of seeing father again after so many months.

DALLETT: Were there many people who were traveling, like you, to come to this country, to live?

LEWIS: I don't know. I really don't know. I have a feeling that most of them were visitors, people that were coming here just to come to New York or the United States for a vacation, or some such thing. I don't think at that time--I

don't remember how many from our boat, for instance, were at Ellis Island.

DALLETT: How about the difference between--you said you were traveling, you thought second class--did you see the conditions in the steerage?

LEWIS: Yes, and they were not the pictures that I have of the boats where they're all huddled together and, you know, I don't even think they called it steerage. I called it steerage and I shouldn't have said that. There was first, second, and third class. They didn't call it steerage. And it was just a less expensive way, and they probably had-- whereas mother had--we had our own cabin, just the three of us, probably there were dormitory type of cabins in the third class. I really don't know, because you didn't mix one with the other, and of course as a child, I didn't have that much interest in it. But they were not poverty stricken people that were--I have a feeling they were probably people, maybe students and thing like that, that went on as cheap as possible vacation, the way young people will go on economy fares today by plane, to see--it was in the summertime, so I have a feeling probably a great deal of the people there were vacationers. But I don't know that; I/m just guessing.

DALLETT: Do you remember, or you might have been too young to even have noticed this, but did your mother have to go through any procedures to enable you to be able to get whatever documents you might have needed, to come move here?

LEWIS: Yes. I'm glad you mentioned that, because we were on a quota. I think the whole world was on a quota at that time. And just so many people from each country were--and this is one of the reasons we had to wait, apart from the money, we also had to wait our turn to meet the quota of so many people who were allowed to come from Denmark each year. I have no idea what it was. And we did know that it was very important to have good medical records, getting into the United States. My father probably wrote that to my mother. And we had documents saying we had been vaccinated, and we had had a thorough physical examination before we left Denmark, which is another thing that puzzles me: why we went through Ellis Island, in spite of that. I don't really know. But we did.

DALLETT: Do you remember what you were traveling with--were they trunks, steamer trunks? How did your mother bring things across?

LEWIS: We had huge-- I really didn't see them much after the next two, three years--we had them with us for a while. We did have one trunk, and then mother had these huge, well, they were suitcases, but they were made out of straw, and they were strapped together, maybe because they were lightweight. I can't imagine why they--or maybe because they were inexpensive, as opposed to leather. And we had three or four of those, that had our clothes in it. And mother had little side bags, you know, where she had the things that we just needed for the voyage.

DALLETT: Had your grandmother given you anything special on that last

day when you saw her?

LEWIS: No. And mementos or something--I got mementos later, after she died. But we didn't get anything interesting--that thought never occurred to me, that she might have given mother something, you know, as a keepsake or something like that, but she didn't. I think I would have known if she had. My grandmother was widowed at that time. Well, I think what you're talking about, if there was some family thing that she might have given my mother as a memento, but not that I recall.

DALLETT: Well, you remembered a doll that was given to you on the ship before; I thought maybe she had given you something special.

LEWIS: Yes--I don't think so, no. I remember getting storybooks, my grandmother bringing storybooks that mother could read to us on the voyage, of course. I can even remember the titles of some of them.

DALLETT: Tell me the titles of some of them.

LEWIS: They wouldn't mean anything to you! They're in Danish! Danish is probably the most--you think German is guttural--Danish is worse. It is probably--Fielding, you know the one that writes the travel guides. Are you familiar with him? Well, he speaks about Finnish as being the most impossible language to speak. Well Danish is almost as impossible--a very guttural language. To my ear--I love French, for

instance--to my ear, it's not a pretty language at all. And, for instance, the name of the book--what brought it to mind--is [Kule Kluk]. Now try to say [Kule Kluk] which means "Little Chicken That Chirps."

DALLETT: It's amazing that you remember.

LEWIS: Well, do you know that when I go back to Denmark today, I'm seventy-one years old, and I go back to Denmark, we never spoke Danish at home after we arrived in the United States. And I don't think I'm more than twenty-four, forty-eight hours, and I'm thinking Danish again. And that's the whole trick, to being able to speak a language. The first day or so, I'm a little embarrassed about my Danish. And I have cousins there by the dozens, and they get a big kick out of the fact I'm still able to speak Danish. But it isn't until I start thinking in Danish that I really become fluent in the language. But I still remember it after all these years. I have never forgotten it. But as I say I can remember that friend of mine went to London with me after my husband died, and I had a cousin whose daughter was there as a nursemaid, or whatever, just to learn English. She spent the summer there; she was in college and she spent the summer there to learn English. And we took her out to the park and to dinner, and so I was speaking to her in Danish. And my friend who is English, American, said to me, "My God, that sounds like Chinese!" So, it isn't the prettiest language in the world. Arriving here, I can't tell you too much else about the voyage, unfortunately, because nothing startling happened. Arriving here, I can remember being very impatient, and

mother being very impatient about going to Ellis Island, because we didn't want this delay. And I still can remember that I had a--I don't think I really vocalized it--but I can remember having visions of my father standing on this far shore waiting for us, while we're going through all this procedure and why can't they just let us go, you know? He's waiting for us, he's there. Why don't they just let us go?

DALLETT: Had your father come through Ellis, do you know?

LEWIS: No, he came through Canada.

DALLETT: So did your mother--was she surprised when she had to go through, or was she--

LEWIS: No, she knew about it. She knew about it. I don't think she expected that it would be quite as grim as it was.

Physically, I can remember the place very well, apart from the fact that I visited it a couple of years ago. But I can remember the huge hall, with all the windows. It was enormous, and of course to a small child, it must have seemed even larger. And I can remember all the little rooms where the doctors were, that would examine us. And I can remember mother showing this doctor these medical documents that she had, and explaining to the doctor that we were examined, we were vaccinated and why this wait, and so on and so forth.

DALLETT: What language was she speaking?

LEWIS: A very, very, very halting English. I'm sure nobody on

Ellis Island spoke Danish at that time. I don't know-- that's a very good question. You--I would be interested to know the people that you have interviewed, whether there were people that spoke, for instance, Russian, or German, you know, people where they came in large numbers.

DALLETT: For the most part, people do remember having some sort of interpreter to help them through the process. But not in all cases.

LEWIS: Well, I guess mother just knew enough English that they probably didn't bother. But I can remember that she was very impatient that they wouldn't accept these documents that she had, and they insisted that we go through these medical examinations regardless .

DALLETT: What was the exam like? Do you remember about that?

LEWIS: Very perfunctory. I think the doctor was very understanding and very sympathetic. Because I don't Remember being anxious about it, or mother evidently must have really gotten it across to him that. But they did have to be careful, because there were an awful lot of people that-- there was an eye disease, I can't remember what it was called, you probably heard about it, that they were especially careful of.

DALLETT: Glaucoma?

LEWIS: Yeah. And tuberculosis, of course, they were. But we had chest x-rays with us, you know, this kind of thing. But anyway, I don't think we were there more than four, five,

six hours at the most. But that probably seemed liked an eternity when you're waiting for somebody.

DALLETT: What else did you have to go through/ Medical exams? Did they feed you there, or--

LEWIS: Well, I told you about the sandwiches. Coming from Denmark, where smorgasbord is a slice of bread and three inches of topping with meats or eggs or herring or whatever, you know, and butter. And we were served lunch. And what they handed mother was ham and cheese sandwiches. Not ham and cheese sandwiches, but ham sandwiches and cheese sandwiches, on white bread, which I know today was Wonder bread, or something of its ilk, you know, with no butter on it, not anything. And I can remember mother taking the slices of bread off, and putting the ham on the cheese, an combining it so that there would be more filling in it than there was bread. I'm not sure--I don't know whether she threw the bread out. She probably did, which must have seemed terrible to these people that came there and were ill fed, you know. But I don't think she actually said it to us, but the feeling must have come across very strongly to me, is this what we're going to eat in the United States? Is that the way they eat in the United States? So it was--

DALLETT: Was it a confusing time? Or was it orderly? How did you know where to go?

LEWIS: It was confusing. It was confusing. You were kind of shepherded all over the place. It seemed to me, and I don't think I'm wrong, that--I don't know whether it was because,

mother incidentally made every stitch of clothes we wore until we graduated from high school. She was a great seamstress. And we were reasonably well dressed, well groomed, and I'd had a feeling, and there again prejudice may have come into it in a country that we came from--that they probably made it a little easier. I had that feeling in retrospect; I don't know if I'm right. That it may have been a little easier than it was for other people that weren't as fortunate, because I have heard some terrible stories about what happened to people on Ellis Island. And it surely didn't happen to us. But it was confusing. You know, it's a huge--it was to me, then, a huge place, and where do you go for this, and where do you go for that, and where do you have your passport stamped, and so on and so forth.

DALLETT: Did your mother have to present any sort of money?

LEWIS: I don't remember any dealings in money. I can't imagine why.

DALLETT: Was your father there to meet you?

LEWIS: He was not allowed on Ellis Island, but when we took the ferry from Ellis Island to New York, he was there in New York to meet us, when the ferry came in. Of course, that was just excitement beyond belief. My father was a tall man; he was foot tall, and quite good looking, and stood out in a crowd. And it was just so exciting to see him there. It was a very tearful reunion, as you can imagine. And, he had already found a furnished apartment for us. And, we lived for the first year in a brownstone in what is now

Bedford-Stuyvesant on what was a very elegant street. I can remember the first black couple that moved into that street in 1924 or '25.

DALLETT: What street was that?

LEWIS: Macon Street. And I--well--it is important--maybe it's because my father traveled, I was brought up with a very strong legacy of not being prejudiced toward other people then. Everybody was equal, and the were good and bad in each race, and so on and so forth. I can remember when we moved from Macon Street to-- I'm sorry--my aunt lived on Macon Street--we lived on Hancock Street. We lived on Hancock Street. That was only a couple of blocks away. And when we moved from there to Flatbush, I can remember we lived over a Chinese laundry, and I came home one day saying something about "the Chinks." I must have picked it up on the street. And my father gave me a lecture for about a half hour about calling people by racial names, or national names, or ethnic names. I've never forgotten it. And now, as an adult, I realize how fortunate I was to have had this lesson brought home to me a very early age. That there were really no differences in people, or religions, or anything, that you were to judge people by what they were and not where they were born and what their religion was, or so on and so forth, which I think was a very nice thing to have as a legacy. Anyway, to get back to Hancock Street--that was the furnished--we're now in almost September, and it's time for school. And I don't know--

DALLETT: You were how old now?

LEWIS: Uh, eight and a-half. And I don't know a word of English. We've only been in the country two weeks. The only experience that I had with English was, mother sent me to the store. She wanted me to get soap. Evidently I didn't pronounce it correctly and came home with a can of soap. But, they--I remember I went to Public School 35. It was on Lewis Avenue, and our parents walked us there the first day, and after that we were on our own. They showed us the way to school, "Now go!" And there are two things I remember about learning English. Only two. After we'd been in school about a couple of weeks, my sister became ill on the way to school. I don't remember with what, an upset stomach or whatever. And I didn't know whether to go back home with her or to go to school, and my instincts told me to go to school, let my sister go home. I went to school. And after I was in class, I felt a little bit guilty about having let my sister go home by herself when she wasn't feeling well, and I started to cry. The crying probably had as much to do with feeling strange with all these people as to having let her go home; it was a multitude of emotions. And the teacher was very sympathetic and wanted to know what I was crying about. Of course, I couldn't tell her. Not in English--to tell her that my sister was sick. But I somewhere along, had picked up the phrase, "I had a headache." So I told the teacher I had--so she was treating me for a headache! Being very sympathetic about the headache, you know, and, I can remember, also, that she had told--discipline was much stricter in school in those days than it was today; if you were told to sit in your seat, you sat. You didn't get up. And she had evidently told the class to be seated, and so on and so forth. It was the beginning of the school year, so that,it was probably a good time to start school. And a fire engine came by. And this was about two, three weeks

later. And I jumped up out of my seat and ran to the window to see this fire engine. And I was punished for getting up out of my seat. and I didn't really know that I wasn't supposed to, you know, that--but those were about the only two or three things that I can remember of having language difficulties. I have no conscious memory of learning English; it came that easily. No conscious memory of struggling with it. They put me in the first grade, and as we learned the language, they would skip us until we came into the grade that we belonged in. And as a matter of fact, when I was in seventh, eighth grade, I was skipped into an "opportunity class" that was for special people that had special aptitudes and things like that. And I ended up doing high school in three-and-a-half years, which we did simply because colleges only accepted you in September. And in those days, you could graduate from high school in January. That was during the Depression. If I had graduated in January, I would have spent six months waiting to get into college. So my whole group of friends, that had been in this "opportunity class," we were all allowed to do high school in three-and-a-half years, so that we got in June and could start college in September. But not wait those six months. Bernard Malamud, by the way, who died recently, I don't know if you remember, was my classmate.

DALLETT: Oh, really?

LEWIS: Yeah. In 181. And, I went to his senior prom, and had quite a little romance there for a while. But, to get back to the English. I don't really have a strong recollection of having any difficulty in learning the language or being frustrated, after maybe several weeks.

DALLETT: Were there other Danish kids in your class at all?

LEWIS: No, not a one. And it was just taken for granted that we were expected to learn the language, and of course, we start in first grade. They're learning to spell, and read , and so they did make it easier for us in that respect.

DALLETT: How about at home? How did your mother and father feel?

LEWIS: Well, we spoke Danish at home, for quite a while, maybe a couple of months. And then by that time, we had made friends, and our friends came to visit us, and my parents would speak Danish and we were embarrassed. My sister and I were embarrassed. And I can remember that when the friends left, we explained to my mother and father that they might think that they were talking about them. And would they please speak English when we had friends in, and not Danish. Do you know we never spoke Danish at home after that. We spoke English. And we spoke English forever afterwards; that was our language. But I was fortunate in that they did have a smattering--well, my father more than my mother--they had some knowledge of English before they came to the country. But, English is not a difficult language to learn. I don't think people all over the world would use English as an almost international language if were that difficult. There again, it's my personal feeling, there's nothing scientific about that statement.

DALLETT: Did your mother and father continue to have a Danish home?

LEWIS: Yes. Absolutely. To this day, Christmas in Denmark is celebrated Christmas Eve, it's not celebrated on Christmas Day. You get your gifts Christmas Eve, and the tree is Christmas Eve. And Christmas dinner, in every Danish home, is the same. It's like Thanksgiving dinner here. You have goose that's stuffed with apples and prunes, and you have red cabbage, and you have Danish candied white potato, that's burnt. And you have a liver pate that is homemade as an appetizer. And to this day, my son and daughter-in-law and my nieces will not change one item of that menu. I bring a lot of the food, you know. One of my nieces is a doctor; she's up in Boston, and she has it one year; my son and daughter-in-law have it another year. They take turns. Last year my niece down here had it, and I'd bring the red cabbage, and I'd bring the pate, and--

DALLETT: Do you have an open house?

LEWIS: And then, first you have the dinner, which is very difficult for the children, because they can't wait to get at the presents, see. But what's worse, after dinner, then you have to dance around the tree. Everybody holds hands and you walk around the tree,and the youngest member of the family picks the first Christmas carol, and so on up, until everybody in the family--if there are twenty people walking around the tree, you'll be singing twenty Christmas carols--of course we have adjusted a little bit, so that the three-year-old can pick "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" which is perfectly all right. But, what I think is wonderful, my sister and I had not pressured them to do this. They just don't want it any other way. When my Liz--my niece that lives here in New York, Liz, when she was in college, she

wrote an essay about a Danish Christmas, so it must mean a tremendous lot to them. And I think it's so nice that, where traditions are so often forgotten, and passed by and there isn't time for it, and--I think those cousins would come from the ends of the earth to be together on Christmas Eve, it means so much to them. When we were on the boat, you know, we had the same thing. We had a Christmas tree; God knows where my fa--how he got it, and stored it. He may have had it burlap-rooted, you know, so that--but it was always the same. And there's a little crown of small Danish flags on top of the Christmas tree, and whoever has the Christmas--those are mother's little Danish flags--and they passed them--these are people that are married to--well, I think it's so wonderful that the sons-in-law and my daughter-in-law, she's so excited about it, she wants the same thing. And my grandson Kenneth now talks about Christmas. How wonderful Christmas is, and he's only three- and-a-half. So it's a very special holiday. Not that the American Christmas isn't special, but it's very different. And I think that they want to carry on the tradition is very nice.

DALLETT: Tell me about when you became a citizen.

LEWIS: Yes. Mother had become a citizen, but in those days, I don't know what the laws are today--the children didn't become citizens as a result of the parents becoming citizens. Maybe because we were adults when she became a citizen. Maybe if we had ben under eighteen when she became a citizen, perhaps we would have received our citizenship. So I was not a citizen when I got married. I was married when I was twenty-two. But there was a law that I think I

would have had to wait five years or whatever it was, to become a citizen, after you took out your first papers. There was a waiting period, before you could become a citizen. And, because I married an American citizen, I only had to wait a year, I think it was; I don't remember if it was a year or two. I think it was a year. And by that time, I had my first office job. I worked as a secretary. And I can remember, I didn't have to take a test because I had a high school diploma. I'd only finished two years of college because of the Depression. But I had a high school diploma and they accepted that. Mother, on the other hand, had to take a grueling test, that she had to learn all about the State Department, and how many members there were in Congress, and who the presidents were. I remember they gave her a book. oh, maybe forty or fifty pages, of things. I remember how nervous she was when she went to take that test, whether she would pass it or not, which she did. And, but because I had a high school diploma, I didn't have to. And, the day came for the, for me to get my citizenship, and I went to this huge courtroom in Brooklyn, and I was so excited, because this was something, really, that I wanted very, very much. And there must have been two, three hundred people in that courtroom, getting their citizenship, that day. And we all took our oath together. The judge was very serious about the whole thing. He didn't at all make the thing seem routine. He must have been a wonderful judge, because the feeling came across that what a privilege it was for us to become American citizens, what a responsibility it was. And he spoke really for about twenty minutes, a half-hour, to this group of people. And you looked around, and everybody was beaming, one was more excited than the other. It was the most wonderful thing in the world, to be an American citizen. It was just the greatest thing in the world. I can

remember my mother had no qualms at all about giving up Danish citizenship. And it was very exciting. And we took our oath, and I think I wept. I really think I wept. And when I got back to the office, on my desk they had American flags and a cake, you know, and they had a party for me. Because this was--it's hard to believe, because we don't hear about it much today, people don't talk much about it, about what an important-- they knew; these people in that office, although they were all Americans, what an important thing this was in my life. And I must say, it is one of the highlights of my life, this receiving my citizenship. Much more important than receiving my first drivers license, which I thought was very important. But it was a gala occasion, and we had a party at home when I-- that night, and, it was just a reason for celebration.