

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

ELLIS ISLAND ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Joseph Weise
Interviewer: Debra Allee
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ALLEE: This is interview number 190. This is Debra Allee. And I'm speaking with Joseph Weise on Thursday, June 5, 1986. We're beginning the interview at about 1:17, and We're going to interview Mr. Weise about his immigration experience from Russia in 1923.

WEISE: I was born in 1894, but I always get mixed up with dates. September--

ALLEE: Fifteenth.

WEISE: Fifteenth, yes. And, as a child I was raised in a village, where my father had a flour mill.

ALLEE: Do you remember the name of the village?

WEISE: Yes. Zavadovka. Z-a-v-a-d-o-v-k-a. Zavadovka. I mean, does that come through all right, my voice? Because I'm--

ALLEE: Your voice is fine.

WEISE: Now, let's see. Up to the age of about fourteen or so, I was in that village, on and off, you know, going to school. But later on, I was living in a big city, in Odessa.

ALLEE: Did your family move to Odessa, the whole family?

WEISE: No, no, the children. We were--my mother had thirteen children. I was the oldest one. And I must say that I'm the oldest one, and the only one that's left. As I'm the oldest one, and my youngest [son] is [Shushka] who lives in Canada.

ALLEE: How did it happen that the children moved to Odessa?

WEISE: Just for the purpose of going to school, because there was nothing else available then, in the small village. So, now, it seems to went rather quick, and then 1914, when World War One started, I was twenty years old. And so, right away, I was in the army. Now, that was the [Joss] army. Um, well, in those days, in those days, you know, it was rather hard to

be in the army. But somehow or other I managed, because I was very well in languages, you know, that I was able to speak Russian very well, you know, I mean, with the accent and everything, even though I'm Jewish, and usually the Jewish kids were brought up on the--to speak either Hebrew or Yiddish. But, my father had different ideas about how to teach his children. He wanted us to know everything, to know Yiddish or Hebrew, at the same time, learn other things. Go to school. Make something of yourself. And, and so, all those years--I mean, it was nothing, actually, what happened to us. We simply--as children, we were brought up and we went to school, and so on. Before we knew it, World War One started, and I was in the army, and three years later, by 1917, you had the Russian Revolution, and, and then, the Communists took over, were fighting against the White Armies, and so on. And then I was taken into the Red Army, because the White Army wouldn't accept Jews.

ALLEE: Oh, I see.

WEISE: The White Army consisted of all those landowners and aristocracy, and so on, and they were actually, they were fighting for their land, because all the villages, all the

factories, everything belonged just to the [. . .]
[attacked] by the Russians. And they occupied the Russia,
and they had had hundred and thousands of acres of land.
That's what was given to them by the Russian Government,
inviting them to come to Russia in the ninth century. That's
when they populated Russia. But that's when you had [. .
.] you had Count [. . .] or Count [. . .] they occupied
Russia. They were given free land, as much as you want, and
Russia was big enough, to give everybody as much as you want.
And then more. So, the--

ALLEE: Do you want to tell me a little about your first army
experience in World War One?

WEISE: In World War One, I was simply--when I was sent into the army,
they usually ask you questions, you know. And they asked me
what occupation I have, and I said I'm a professional
photographer. Which I was. So, they said, "Have you got a
camera?" I said, "No." I didn't come to the--I was taken
to the army, I didn't know that they have to bring their
camera with me. So they said, "Well, write a letter to send
the camera here." So I did. And so, that helped me a bit in
this respect: that they took me into the Air Force. The Air

Force at that time was beginning to develop, in World War One. It was--well, let's see. World War One, in the Air Force.

ALLEE: [Looking at photographs] I see the wings over there, on your--

WEISE: And the [. . .]--

ALLEE: On your hat--

WEISE: Yes, that's a [Joss] army. Because they--

ALLEE: I can tell it's you.

WEISE: Yeah?

ALLEE: Yes.

WEISE: Well, take a look at that one. About thirty years later, with a cigar--a cigarette. So, that helped me right along--

ALLEE: Did you take photographs for the Air Force?

WEISE: Yes. Well, they took a lot of--a lot of pictures were taken of trenches, and so on, and sent to the German staff, and used to develop them right away and give them, because everything goes fast. And then, there's--when all the photographers were registered already, that's a mobilization, and so on, after they were registered, us photographers, they set us up in the laboratory, and everybody had to do the work. And then when the war started, and we were assigned to the aviation division, that's where I got my uniform, and the wings, and so on. And there, every, every once in a while, whenever the flyer would have to go up--in those days, it was quite a problem, you know--don't forget, it was 1914, 1915, 1916, you know--so, they had a plane goes up, and we had to take--he would signal me, and I would take pictures. He would be flying over certain sections that they wanted to know the position of the artillery--

ALLEE: So you'd be in the plane with him.

WEISE: I was in the plane with him, and that's what we used to do. And every day, another one was flying, in other words,

everybody had to go. Because, in everything you did--war planes, and there more man, and so on, each was--used to come, in the morning, used to wake up, and go into the dining room, and there was a list: today's assignments, that--how do you call them--the rank of the soldier--what's called the American soldier--

ALLEE: The rank of the soldier? The title? Like, lieutenant, or, captain--

WEISE: No, but they are officers. What they're [. . .]

ALLEE: Private? Or corporal?

WEISE: Private, yeah, private. Actually, I still think in Russian when it comes to these things, you know, and the Russian word is

[ara-broy]. That means "he's taken out from the line." [A-rab] means "line." And [ara-broy] means "coming out from that line." So [ara-broy] was to go to the plane at ten o'clock where he's going to join with flyer and to take pictures, that's all. And that's what we were doing there.

ALLEE: Did you ever get shot at?

WEISE: Yes. Well, you know, those days, to shoot down a plane, was actually just by accident. [. . .] You'd go, and all of a sudden, you'd see a dollar laying there on the floor. I mean, there was just an accident; they would shoot. The plane was [. . .] and they were shooting [sometimes] a mile away. By the time, you know, they were everything wasn't organized as well as it is today. Today, they can do it in a second. They can figure out exactly, and shoot, and actually pinpoint the thing. But, so it--I was never shot down. But, there were other reasons why some planes would fall down, or something would happen, you know. All that was going on all right until 1917. I was sent to Kiev, and we on the front didn't know what was going on. The army [generals] didn't know who was bothering to think about politics, or so on. You didn't bother in those days about anything, because anything that you know, if you told, they shoot you; that's all, that's all. "What are You? Bolshevik, or what are you. A revolutionary?" You know, like. So, the plain soldier didn't know a thing, what's going on. There were no newspapers had anything to know, and so, as I said, they sent me off to Kiev, to take an extra course in certain

new developments. And so I went there, and when I came to Kiev, you know, Kiev is a big city. And, I had to find my way where to go, and so on, and there were students, you know, going around with leaflets, an army--"Here, take this, give it to your friends. Take this, to your friends." And he was going back to the front--"Give this to your friends," and so on. So, you know, in those days, [. . .] It was three years in the war already, where everybody was actually worn out, and so on. And so, discipline wasn't as it was originally when we started in 1914. This was 1917. The soldiers were tired already, hungry. And so on. So, when I came back from the front, back to the--they surrounded me. "What's going on there? We heard something, but we don't know what's going on." So I told them, the Revolution. In there. Well, we don't say anything, because [. . .] shoot you too; didn't ask anybody. So, then one day, the Revolution started. And soldiers started to go home from the front. They left the trenches, and they went home, with the guns. That's how the Revolution started. And then, there were men like Trotsky and Lenin and all the others, Stalin and all the others, you know, that were real revolutionaries. That--like Stalin, for instance, well actually, for all his life, he was in Siberia. So, all these organized all the other students and

so on. And in addition to that the soldier, himself, was also--he was cold and hungry, and he didn't see any--for three years of fighting and fighting and killing and so on, and you see piles of soldiers laying on top of one another, like this here, just piled together like that, for burying. I took pictures of that. So, when the Red Army defeated the White Armies, which was actually the easiest thing for them, for the Red Army to win, because the White Army were--consisted all of officers, of the nobility. So, when the Red Army consisted most of peasants and plain, plain, the plain person--and these students, now, we considered them like our friends, and they promised things to us--"You are not going to be hungry; we are going to give you this; we are going to give you the land; we are going to give you the factories. They are all yours." And so on and so forth. And so, and then, all the soldiers went home with guns, and as they were nearing the--you know, we were let's say in Poland, and then from Poland, everybody went home. So we went--I went to Odessa, others went to Kiev, and so on. And as we came there, they organized us, and they formed an army. And that's how the Red Army was organized. And so I was in the Red Army. And, then the Red Army started fighting the White Army, and was the army of [. . .] all these armies that

we were fighting, we were plain soldiers led by these revolutionary students from colleges, and we took over and we beat them. We beat 'em for the simple reason that they didn't want to fight. And we had to fight because they made us fight. And they promised us things, and so on. So, that was 1917. And it lasted 1918 and 1919, and so on. By that time, Lenin was already sitting in Moscow. They occupied the [Kerensky's] government first, and then Lenin took over, and so on. Now, when all these armies were liquidated, and the entire [Joss], entire family with all the dukes and all the others, they took them and they put them in sealed trains to Siberia. And shot 'em all there, every one. The children and everyone. And, that's when the Bolsheviks had the free hand to do in Russia what they really wanted. Now, nobody could stop them for the simple reason, they were all worn out. You take, England, at that time, was very hungry. I'm just reading now, I finished reading, the what's the name of that book, in the back of you--The March of Folly. Did you read it?

ALLEE: I haven't. It's on my list. Did you like it?

WEISE: Oh, very big book. I just finished it. I read all those books. I read books on military, like, Eisenhower's book,

what do you call, I forget the name, my memory's not so good.
So, all that was when everything was quiet already, and so
on, and the Revolution was won, and we were settled, and
we thought, well, now's the time that we are going to get
something for our efforts. But, nothing materialized,
because it was all very simple, you know. People want
to--people will work, they'll do anything, providing you give
them something for that. On paper, it--communism works very
good. But in practice, it just doesn't work that way. Which
reminds me of the famous story that the

Jewish writer, Sholom Aleichem--did you ever hear of him?

ALLEE: Oh, sure.

WEISE: He wrote about communism. So, you know, it's a short story,
communism. So he described communism to the average person,
this way. That the people were complaining that there
is--things are bad, we are poor. The rich people have
money, but the poor people haven't got any money and if they
haven't got any money, they can't buy any bread and they
can't feed their children, and so on and so forth. What
shall we do? So, he says, alright, God said to them, "We'll
change that, right away." And that's the story that he

wrote, a famous story. So there was a--suddenly the sky got dark. And lightening in the sky, from all sides. And letters in like a lightening, that the amount of money in the world today is forty-one billion and so on and so forth. And according to population, everyone gets ten thousand dollars. So, the next day, everybody came, and they gave them ten thousand dollars. So there's a lot of money, good. But, the fellow that was the shoemaker--usually poor people have a lot of children, you know. It's always known. The rich man has always one or two children. But the poor man has twelve children. So, this man was more or less well to do, he sits in his house, and you know, in Europe in those days, the water carrier brought in water in the morning. So, he looks out of the window. "Oh, there's the water carrier." He says, "Hey [Joe]. How about some water?" "What's the matter? Some water? Go and get yourself water." I got [am richer than you] He says, "I got twelve children, I got myself 120,000 rubles, that's all. I need water, I go out and I get it." Same thing on to the bakery. Bakery was closed. Nothing. Says what's that. He said, "You want bread? Take flour, and bake it for yourself and that's all. Very simple." Another way it showed, this way. That a person has to work. And if nobody works, then everybody goes around hungry. And so

there is, they started crying again, so God says, "Well,
what do you want now? Do you want it the way it was before?"
So he says, "All right." Back to number one. So that is
his idea, and which is the true idea of communism, in Soviet
Russia now, you have everything you want there. I was there.
I went for a visit to Russia.

ALLEE: When did you go?

WEISE: I want to go--I promised my wife, on the fiftieth anniversary.
We were married in twenty-eight. So in 1978, we went by
plane, and I say, "I'll show you Russia." She's
American-born. So, I show her Russia. You go in, you want
to buy something. She says to me, "All right, let's go get
some chocolates." So there's a line. So we stand on the
line. And we say, well, what's going to happen. Say, "All
right, I like to see what's going to happen." So, we're
waiting in the line, finally the line started moving and I
got a ticket. With that ticket I have to go and pick out
the candy that I want. Then, come back with the ticket, to
the same cashier, and I pay her, and I go with the paid
ticket back to the other cashier, to the other saleslady,
and she gives me the candy. I say, "What? I have to stand

an hour, to buy a piece of candy?" So, that is the system.
It doesn't work.

ALLEE: Let's go back to 1917--1918, when you begin to discover that
it wasn't working?

WEISE: It wasn't working. So, I figured to myself that that just
wasn't working, it doesn't. So, the Polish--Poland attacked
Russia in 1920. And that left it for about six months, and
in 1921, I figured, well now's the time for me to get out of
Russia. And I knew the neighborhood very well, in that
section where we were fighting, so I went across the border
at night, into--the borders in those days were actually
open. Because nobody would go anywhere--where is he going to
go? When there is hunger all over? So I went over into
Poland, and then from Poland into Germany, from Germany to
France, and it took me two years by the time, to get from
France, I wrote--when I came into Germany, I wrote a letter
to my relatives in Philadelphia. And they sent me a ticket,
and it took them two years before they were able to do all
that work. Meanwhile I was staying in France.

ALLEE: We're running out of tape. We're going to turn the tape over.

This is the end of side one.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

ALLEE: This is the beginning of side two.

WEISE: So, I--

ALLEE: Did you just travel through Germany, or did you stop there?

WEISE: No, just--didn't stop there. Just went through, and went to France, and in those days, it was very hard to get to United States, because, there--you know, there's an organization, the HIAS, Hebrew Aid Society--and they organized well, in the beginning, right after, because during the war, they couldn't do anything. There were no traveling of any kind. To give an idea, my relatives that went to United States, they went to the United States in 1910. Then, by 1914, the war started, and from 1914 until 1921, you couldn't, we couldn't travel anywheres, because there was Germany was at war, Poland, Russia, France, all that section was at war, and there was never of traveling. But by 1921, truce had been acquired, [. . .], the war was over. So, when I came to

France, and I got the paper, because I was there for two
years, and I got the papers--got them and to the ship in
Cherbourg.

ALLEE: Where in France did you live?

WEISE: In Paris.

ALLEE: In Paris?

WEISE: Yeah.

ALLEE: Did you do photography?

WEISE: No, I did something better, that I never counted on
that, but I traveled, it came in handy. I was a lover of
languages. So, I knew, naturally, I knew Yiddish and Hebrew,
Hebrew is a natural thing to study when you are a child, you
know, and then I was [. . .], that means, I went to regular
school where I studied Russian, so I knew the Russian
language very well. Then, I happened to meet some people at
the time during the war and so on, where they were, they
were coming in from United States to Russia, after the

Revolution was successful. So, there were a lot of people from Russia--

ALLEE: Who came home?

WEISE: Who came--from the United States, from Russia, but they were in United States [and for instance] Trotsky. Trotsky was sitting in the East Side, in a restaurant, and he was showing them with matches, how he was going to conquer Russia. Which he did, actually. I mean, they were laughing at him, but he showed them [. . .] to organize an army, and how he was going to conquer all of Russia, see. So, back to languages. So I sort of started with some of these Americans that I got acquainted with. There wasn't much else to do. There was no any fighting of any kind, you know. The war, the actual war, was over in 19--by 1920. But, the real fighting was going on only at the time of the Revolution, during the pre--from 1914 to 1917, the war was going on, you couldn't do a thing. From 1917 to 1920, there were just--a Revolution--there was just a mix-up, there was nothing there. People did what they wanted, and the government didn't know what to do. It was a mix-up there. Everywhere was fighting, the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, and all the other revolutionaries and so

on, and everybody going to be the boss, and so on. We didn't know; we didn't--they were the revolutionaries. We didn't know. We were just young, young fellows, you know. So we let them do whatever they wanted. We couldn't do anything else. We are [. . .] If you don't do what they tell you, they shoot you, and that's all. So we do what they tell you. And I--oh yes, so coming back to the language. So that's where I started to picking up languages. And, so on. And I found the English language, I found it very easy to learn. As compared to French, or to any other language, or the Russian language which is very difficult. But the Russian language also always been with this Russian and Slavic languages, so that was Polish, similar to Russian. That doesn't mean that the Pole will speak to me in Russian, nor I speak to him--we understand each other, but each language speak his language a little bit better. His own language. So, you learn Polish, you learn Russian, you learn Ukrainian, similar language. You learn a little bit of German, the Yiddish language is also full of--it's a mixed language. And because after the Jews came from Spain, then in the fifteen hundreds, when they came from Spain, Spain throw them out, and Germany accepted the Jews at that time. And invited them in. And so, so the mixture--it was a

mixture of Spanish and German, which was not actually a good German. There was a German that was picked up and [. . .] by the person, you know. Anyway, speaking of language, the Yiddish language, it's a good language, plain. But it's mixed--there is in it Hebrew, and German, and Spanish, and French, because the people were traveling, and they were in all those places and they kept going forth, especially after, let's say, when Napoleon conquered, went all the way to Moscow, you know. So on. He left also the strain of everything French, you know. And so on. And so, that's how all those languages, you know--so as I said, I was a lover of languages.

ALLEE: And so you'd learned English. By the time you got to Paris you could speak English.

WEISE: Yeah. I learned the English language; I had nothing else to do. So I knew the English language very well, and I--they sent us all from Paris to Romania, because the HIAS established a Romania--

ALLEE: You mean you had to leave France and go back to Romania?

WEISE: Yeah. That's where they--because they wanted to get all the Jews out from Russia, as many as possible. And so they used [. . .] regionally. I actually went to border and I went into Poland. And the easiest thing for me was to go to Romania. Yes. Because it was the nearest thing to Poland, but some was told that it was better to go to France because the ships are already there. But then you found out later, dealing with those three years that you're sitting there. So the beginning--when we arrived, groups were arriving--so when we arrived, we found out that the HIAS established a main office in Romania, in Bucharest. And so, all the, all the--those that were on the way to the United States, went to Romania. There's probably another reason for it, because it was after the war, and all the countries were actually very poor. In comparison to Romania, it was--Romania was about the best spot. And being that they were able to get more things for the refugees, and to organize them and be able to put them on ships and send them. So, from there, we were told we would go back to France to Cherbourg. Land--I mean, land on the ship, and on the way to the United States.

ALLEE: So you did that; you spent two years in Paris, and then you went to Romania.

WEISE: Those two years I spent in Paris, or Romania.

ALLEE: Oh, one place or another.

WEISE: Yes. So, while in Romania, you know, I--there's a very big office, you know, you know, to describe the office, it was like
Pennsylvania Station. But, but all the windows, many windows and everything, and there were all the inquiries, you know, everybody, all the--what do you call those, that go, they leave their homeland?

ALLEE: Immigrants.

WEISE: Immigrants. All the immigrants were always sitting there, finding out whether they heard anything, was there any mail for them from United States. Because everybody had relatives in the United States. And so, when I landed in Romania, I went over to this HIAS Society, and I told them that I'm looking for some work. He said, "What can you do?" So, I said, "I'm a photographer." So he says, "Well, there are some studios were. You go?" I said, "Yes, I went there."

And they gave me this work, but you know, this work, I could eat that day, but what would I do tomorrow? So, he says, "Well, what else can you do?" So, I said, "Well, the only thing I know, is I can speak English." But I spoke it in Russian. So he said, "You speak English?" He says, "Maybe you can do something with that. Put up a sign," he says. "Right here on the wall." You know that--so I put up a sign. Russians--in Russian, I put it on. "Russian student gives lessons in English." Hung it up. I sit in the chair. And so, I had nothing else to do. When, meanwhile I'm watching the window [. . .] of giving instructions, you know. I see that there are a couple of inquirers speaking to him. And he point his finger and he says, "You see that fellow there? Go over to him." So, a couple come over to me, and they say, "Are you the fellow that teaches English?" I said, "Yes." So they spoke to me in Russian. So, he said, "Well, we are on the way to the United States." I said, "We all are." He said, "But I have two children, a boy and a girl, six and eight years old," he says. "Whatever they learn, they don't have anything else to do. They can't go to school here, because they're in Romania, you know, so they won't accept them in. So, whatever they learn will be--will help them along; I mean, it couldn't do any harm."

I say, "No, they'll learn anyhow, to know." And, I, I myself was learning the language, myself. So what do I do, I bought the Berlitz method of learning. And, you know, the Berlitz method is a [bridge to] to conversational English. In other words, do whatever you can, but don't speak the language that they know. Speak to them only in English. Okay, so you give an example on the first page. "This is a pencil, this is a book, this is a ink, this is a table, a lamp," and so on. And then you ask them, "What is this?" And he said, "That's a lamp." "And what is this?" "That's a book." See, well that's how you learn the language.

ALLEE: Did you get a lot of students?

WEISE: I--before the day was over, I had every hour, from eight in the morning until nine in the evening, taken. And, there was another convenience for me, how to cover so many area, so many students. All the people that arrived, all the immigrants were concentrated in one particular section. The city. Put up one particular section for all the immigrants. And that's where they were all there, so that actually from eight in the morning until nine in the evening, I was going from one door to another, and so on. To teach. Berlitz method. And

so on. And so, meanwhile, I myself was learning, because
you come to a point in the book, you know, where the student
doesn't know anything, he doesn't think of the fact that I
was born in Russia. So, all right, the first ten, fifteen
pages are easy. But then, you know, you got to go something
more, just to tell a little story. Others will be interested.
You got to tell them. So, you come to the point where you
have to explain to him, in English, without using the
Russian language. You got to explain to him the word, or
else you wouldn't let him learn anything, he wouldn't
know. So, it's all very simple, with a certain
language. And--I mean, certain words. But the thing I want to
explain to him, the word, "doubt." Now, how you going to
explain "doubt"? I can tell you all day long "I doubt," what
a doubt is, and you'll be looking at me, you'll say, "What does
it mean?" So, you got to try to develop my own system of
explaining to them. So I tell them, "You get letters from
America?" Say, "Yes." "You get money in there sometimes?"
Says, "Yes, sometimes you find a dollar." I say, "Did you get
any recently?" So, he says, "Yes," he got it on, couple days
ago. "Well, let me guess. Did you get any money there?" He
says, "Yes." "Well, I'll guess how much you got there. I
doubt if you got a hundred dollars." And he's talking,

because he couldn't understand, but I told him, "You got
sometimes a dollar. Or sometimes more. But I doubt that
you got a hundred dollars." And that's how you caught on the
word "doubt." See, and by teaching him that way, he knew the
word "doubt," see. So, as I said, I was very successful at
my day, every day was occupied, seven days a week, morning
and night. Got myself well-dressed, got everything. I had
dollars to work with, see.

And--

ALLEE: And by and by--

WEISE: And by and by and by, I myself, was reading, and at the same
time, I was reading, taking books like Tolstoy's War and
Peace,
or Russian writer Gogol that I like very much, and so on, I
can't think--Dostoevsky, and so on, and I was--I had nothing
else to do. And I was young. And I had a pretty good head,
I mean, as far as memories are concerned, you know, that, to
this day, you know, I have a young lady working for me, I
mean she is taking care of us. So, she came in to me about a
year ago, over a year ago. Landed here from Russia. And she
was out of work. She couldn't find anything in the United

States. And somebody brought her over to me. And, because--and the person that I knew, that I'm looking for a girl that would take care of me and my wife, that was about a year ago. We both didn't feel too well, and so on, and we couldn't help ourselves very well. Even though I have four married daughters, American-born, but you know, how children are, they have their own families to take care of. And besides, my children were the kind of children that--they probably inherited that from me--they wanted to study. So, one is now, she's a principal at a high school over here. Then, [O'Gradys, O'Gradys], over here in Borough Park. In Brighton. She's a principal there.

ALLEE: We were talking about your memories.

WEISE: Yeah, about the memories, yes. So, they were always willing to learn, just to study. And, they remembered very well everything. So they were all successful, all four of them.

ALLEE: Well, that's good.

WEISE: Yes, four daughters. Here they are on the wall, and there

are grandchildren. And my children also. Okay, so I knew--

ALLEE: Yeah, you had said--you were about to tell me that you translated Russian, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.

WEISE: Yes, yes. So I was doing all that, and so on. And, I found that I, by the time that I came to the United States, that I knew the language pretty good. In fact, what happened when I came to the United States, you know, they usually expect you come to the relatives, naturally. So I landed in Philadelphia, where all my relatives were. And my uncle came to United States in 1910, and I came in 1923. Thirteen years later. Now, he came here with five boys, in 1910. He came also because he had to make a living. And besides this, he didn't want five boys to go into the army. They, eventually--they were kids, you know, but eventually they have to go to the [Joss] army, and the [Joss] army was a terrible army to go to. So, so when I came to him, thirteen years later, so the children were big, they were my age. So he says to me, "Well, [Johann], what do you want to do in the United States?" So I said to my uncle, "This greenhorn is not a greenhorn. Your children are green. You see, because I'm surprised," I said, "that your children don't

know the English language." I spoke to them. So then, [. . .] to me. He says, "How could they know the language? When we came here, in 1910," he says, "I was working for three dollars a week, softening up skins, I was standing all day long in the bathtub, and skins were tall and sometimes like this here, all day long. Three dollars a week." You know, in 1907 and 1908, they had the terrible depression here, so, he says, "What do you want to do?" I said, "[Anything]. I don't--I didn't come to the United States like you did. You didn't know the language.

You didn't have anything in your hands, like, you should be able to do something, specializing in something." I said, "I am a professional photographer. And besides that, I know the English language well. "Oh," he says, "You just came from Zavadovka, you know the English language?" I said, "That's right, I came from Zavadovka, but I didn't stay in Zavadovka. I was in the big cities, and on the way here, I used my time for--not for roaming around there with girls, because I was using my time to do something else. And I prepared myself, so that when I, when I come to the United States, I'll be able to earn a living. The fact of the matter is," I said, "Where is the main street in Philadelphia?" He says to me, "The main street is Eighteenth and Chestnut. I says,

"How do you get there?" He says, "Take the streetcar, and you'll land there, on Eighteenth Street, get off." And so, I did that. I passed by, there's a nice studio, I see beautiful portraits. I go in, and the girl meets me, she says, "What can I do for you, young man?" I said, "I am a professional photographer, and I would like to--I'm looking for work." She says, "Just a moment." The boss came out to me. He says to me, "You're a photographer?" I say, "Yes." "Where did you work before?" I said, "I just arrived yesterday." He looks at me--"Just arrived yesterday? How come you speak English?" I said, "Well, I studied languages in Russia." And they didn't see, you know, in these intervening years, in 1910 to 19--actually, 1913 until 1921--they were [. . .] Russia [. . .] You know, Europe supplied photographers, all kinds of [. . .] to United States. Europe supplied that. So, but nobody from Europe came to the Unites States in those years. So there was a shortage [there]. In fact, he says to me, "All right, let me see what you can do. [. . .] manager." You know, [. . .] studios that traded to the four hundreds, you know. So, he says to me, "See what you can do." Took me upstairs, I go upstairs, there are sixteen people working, retouchers. All right, he give me a negative. All right. Usually it takes about an hour to do

a retouching, you know, those days were different than today. Used to work and work on glass plates, you know. You got to be very careful, because it's--if you break the glass plate, trying [. . .] for you again. You just can't do it, see. So, he says to me, "You are very careful." I said, "I know, because I was working in other places where also glass negatives." And there other kind of negatives. So, made the negatives, the manager looks at it, and gives it to the boss. [. . .] you know. Comes up and says to him, "Well, he's pretty good." He says to me, "Well, what else can you do?" I said, "Well, I can do anything in photography. I can do printing, I can do anything. Spotting, retouching, and so on." He says, "All right. I'll tell you what you do. The regular price that we pay, regular wages that we pay, is twenty-five dollars a week. But being that you know the language and also the fact that you are able to help us in other things like printing and so on, I'll let you have for forty dollars a week. "That's the highest salary paid, in 1923. So, he says, and so I said, "All right." I said, "I just want to ask you one thing, will I be able to make a living on forty dollars?" He says, "Yes, you'll be able to make a living." All right. I worked. I worked all day, six o'clock, he tells me, "You like to put some overtime?" I said, "Yes."

I was young, and so on. I was hungry for work. So he says to me, "Well, continue working." All right. The next day, same thing, and so on. "You want to do some more things?" "Sure." Okay. Meanwhile, that first day, I was working until about ten o'clock at night. And then I went back to my uncle's house. He says, "What happened to you? I was going to call the police already! What happened?" So I said, "Well, anyhow, I was working." So he says, "What [hours] are you working?" I said, "Well, I was working in a studio. And they needed some extra work, so I stayed there." "So how much are they going to pay you?" I said, "They're going to pay me forty dollars a week." "Oh, you mean forty dollars a month. "I said, "No," because in Europe it's--they don't pay by the week, they pay by the month. I said, "No, forty dollars a week." He says to his son, "What are we going to do with him? He thinks he knows it all!" He said, "All right." The end of the week, you know, they used to pay the wages by sealed envelope. Friday evening, he give me a sealed envelope. That's all, Saturday and Sunday closed. I didn't open up the envelope. I went back home. I said, "Well, I got my salary." He says, "How much?" he said. "I don't know." "Open, open it up, I don't know, I don't know the money. You have to tell me whether they paid me right.

Forty dollars a week." Counts all the money, says, "You got
sixty dollars." I said, " I put some overtime." He calls up
his son, he says, "How do I get [. . .]? He just got idea,
he's making sixty dollars a week." I said, "That's the
difference," I said, "between you and me." I said, "You
came to the United States and you had nothing in your hands that
you are able to do. To really produce something. So, you can't
compare yourself. And I come, besides having a specialty in my
hand, I know the language, so I'm not a greenhorn anymore," I
said.

ALLEE: We're going to change the tape. This is the end of the first
tape of interview number 190 with Joseph Weise. It is now
2:18.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

ALLEE: This is the beginning of the second tape of interview 190
with Joseph Weise. This is Debra Allee. It is June 5, 1986
at 2:20

p.m. Why don't you tell us about the journey itself, going
to Cherbourg, and getting on the boat, and all that.

WEISE: Yes. Then, one day, we received, I received notice--when I came to the station, to the HIAS, I was inquiring whether there was any mail for me, and sure enough there was. And so I received the ticket to go to United States. Now, I asked him, "What do I do now?" He says, "Go and have your picture taken, and bring it to me, and then we'll tell you in a couple of days. You'll be leaving in a couple of days. All right. I did that. And, prepared all the papers, and told us where appear all of us, you know. To appear at a certain hour in the morning, and we all went to the, to the port in Cherbourg, and we came on a ship, and we land--we went on a ship, and it was Homeric. So, I--you know, there's--on the ship, you know, all those people that travel, you know. Naturally, we traveled on the, you know, the--we were by the, actually we were traveling free of charge, like. It was paid by the HIAS, see. All we had to have was a paper that somebody is going to be responsible for us. Otherwise, all the money was gathered by this HIAS, by this society, to help us get to United States. Once you are in the United States, you are off their hands. They did their job. And so, I came aboard, and, you know, you are aboard ship. So you go around, you go around the deck, you know. And there I heard somebody speak English.

So I was standing there, and then I know that to let them
know, because by my clothes, you know, they wouldn't be able
to tell that I speak English. So, maybe he wouldn't even
look at me because the passengers were already aboard. Like,
we were traveling, what do you call--

ALLEE: Steerage.

WEISE: Steerage, you see. And, these people were already--

ALLEE: First class, second class?

WEISE: First class, or second class. Not first class, probably.
Second, or third class. Anyway they were up, one step up.

So

that's where I went, upstairs, and that's where I struck up a
conversation with one fellow. And he said, "Where do you come
from?" I said, "From Russia." He say, "Are you going to
America?" I says, "Yes." All right, so he asked me a
couple of questions, this and that. And then he says, "You
wouldn't by any chance play chess?" I said, "Yes, as a
matter of fact, I do." See, Russians' favorite game is
chess. So, well then, that was all very simple for me. And

I spoke English, only English. I had nobody else to speak
to. I spoke to English only and playing chess all day long.

ALLEE: Not bad.

WEISE: And we're traveling, we're traveling for eight days. And, so
I was already--I felt like I accomplished something. And,
came
to the United States. So, aboard ship was, I am not,
probably, because of that I, I saw so much in my life, that I
was, I was not to [set to be] any sicknesses or so on.

ALLEE: You weren't seasick.

WEISE: No.

ALLEE: You're lucky.

WEISE: I was looking at people, they were, they were sick. They
couldn't eat anything, it was terrible. They [. . .] they
couldn't eat anything. I couldn't understand. "Why don't
you eat?" It was a nice, nice meal. I would go downstairs
where they would eat. I would sit downstairs, you see. "Why

can't they eat?" she says to me. So, "Why can't you eat?" I
didn't even notice a thing about the seasickness, you know.
So, well, we landed in the United States. So, we go before a
judge, you know. They were very careful in looking over the
immigrants that are coming in.

ALLEE: Yes. Did you land in Ellis Island?

WEISE: Ellis Island. Yes. Ellis Island. Oh yes. I got up in the
morning, and I take a look at the Statue of Liberty. Never
forget. Even today, I get, I get overwhelmed by emotion. The
day went, we went before the judge. He says to me--he says
to the interpreter, "Ask him what he's going to be in the
United States." So, I said, "Your Honor, can I answer the
question?" He said, "You speak English?" I said, "Yes."
"Were you in the United States before?" I said, "No." "So,
how come you speak English?" Because if you were in the
United States before, they won't ever let you in. You
understand? Once you are in the United States and you went
back, you want to come back again, you can't do it. I said,
"Well, I studied languages, and I know the language well."
He says, "How much money you got in your pocket?" I said, "I
got fifty cents." He said, "That'll take you to the Bronx."

Put on a ticket on my--you know, they put on a ticket on your jacket, to let me through. And off I went.

ALLEE: But you didn't go to the Bronx. You went to Philadelphia.

WEISE: Well, yes.

ALLEE: Let me stop and ask you a couple of questions to see if you remember about Ellis Island. Do you remember your impressions--I mean, you were landing on American soil for the first moment.

WEISE: Yes, yes. What I remember is this: that I went into a large room, and there were many, many--what do you call--benches. All over, there were benches. And there was a cement floor. And there were all kinds of people; for the first time in my life I saw a black person. I looked at him. I knew such a thing, but I never saw a live one, because you couldn't see it in Russia, you know. So I looked at him. And I saw a woman--I couldn't understand why they are black. [. . .] on me that I just couldn't understand. And, and I was on Ellis Island just a couple of days. And then, the next day, you know, they let me go, before the judge.

ALLEE: You spent the night there.

WEISE: Spent the night there. And, first thing in the morning I went before the judge, and he asked me a few questions, and a ticket, and off I went.

ALLEE: Did you meet anybody on Ellis Island, any interesting people, or did you talk to--

WEISE: No. On Ellis Island, I didn't, because I didn't stay there long enough. And then, I was [. . .] by the entire thing, I was just looking, I was just looking, that it's a different world. You see, so that's all I can remember, actually, because there was nothing there else that impressed me except the Statue of Liberty and that's all, and the food that they gave us.

ALLEE: What was the food?

WEISE: It was good food. I mean, it was good that, actually a person that was used to having good food, you know, could eat it. But,

we were brought up different in there. The cleaning [. . .] alone, that was there, or I did, made the food delicious.

Because, in Europe, things are not clean. Not the way they

are in the United States. You see? And so on. But, what [. . .] the very next day I left. And--

ALLEE: Did you go right to Philadelphia?

WEISE: I went right to Philadelphia. I had the ticket, I--

ALLEE: Did the HIAS people help you get to the station?

WEISE: Yes, yes. The HIAS representative was there, and they asked me, they asked me where I want to go, and I told them this is my

address in Philadelphia, and I showed him everything, and he took me to the station. And there not [. . .] few of us, he

took to the station. And, because some landed somewhere in different places, like--oh, I don't remember. There were a

few people. He says, "You want to as far as Philadelphia, then you get off Philadelphia, you take the streetcar, and you go there, to this address, and that's all." And so I did.

ALLEE: What did New York City look like to you?

WEISE: I did not see it. I only saw the East Side, where I get off the boat. And we went in a group. We went with them, from the HIAS. And he directed certain groups to certain places and so on, and certain groups to Pennsylvania Station. And so I went with them to Pennsylvania Station, and, but, what I remember, things that impressed me, that the doors opened by themselves.

ALLEE: Right.

WEISE: That I remember. And not only that. "Next stop, Canal Street," you know, things like that.

ALLEE: The loudspeakers.

WEISE: Yes. And, that's all. Then we came to Pennsylvania Station, bought the ticket, and I went to Philadelphia.

ALLEE: So you did very well on your first day in Philadelphia, or your first day looking for a job. Did you stay there long,

with your

uncle?

WEISE: Oh, yes. Here's how I was, why I was staying in Philadelphia.

I didn't stay long in Philadelphia. I arrived in United States in October. Now, there's no reason why--how come I got a job so fast? Now, this is something people that--people that don't know about it don't realize, what it was in those days. Photography in those days, in the twenties, was very, very much in style. It was a new thing, and so, when I came to the studio, and later--I didn't find that out until later on--that I could have gotten twice as much.

ALLEE: I see.

WEISE: There was such a demand before Christmas, you know, October, it was actually the beginning before Christmas, where the studios all were overwhelmed with work. And there was--you know, in those days it was a much slower process than today, you know. So, when he saw me as a retoucher, he thought that I landed through the sky. "Well, where do you come from?" he [said].

"Russia [. . .]," I said. He looks at me, he couldn't believe it. Because he didn't see a newcomer from Europe. I mean, there were, but you know, how many photographers altogether? There weren't so many, in general. But, if--when immigration was open, so a lot of them would come in from Romania, from Germany, from Russia, from all over, all the countries, people come into the United States. But when immigration was at the stop, you know, and so on, it was entirely different. So, so--when he asked me, when he told me that he is going to give me forty dollars a week, he got a bargain. Later on I found out. Because all the photographers, later on, they told me, "Why didn't you come to me? We give you eighty dollars! I needed a retoucher!"

When we were talking money, you see? It was a style. So, I worked there, October, November, and December, and after Christmas, I was fired.

ALLEE: I see.

WEISE: And then, I said to him, "What am I going to do now?" I said, "I thought I have a steady job." He says to me, "Well, I'll tell you. After Christmas, I have to keep my men. They always worked for me. I can't fire them and take you." See, so, "You'll find a job. You go up to New York, you'll

find a job." All right. I had that in mind anyway. Because
from the very first day as I came in, and I saw that, when I
was reading the newspaper, so, there was another incident
that I have to tell about the newspaper. You know, European
newspapers are two pages. You know that?

ALLEE: No, I didn't.

WEISE: Always. Even today.

ALLEE: They're just two pages?

WEISE: Sure. A newspaper is two pages. American newspaper is
entirely different. So, the fellow came aboard. When I
wasn't at work yet. And, "Newspapers!" "How much?" "Two
cents." Okay, I gave him two cents, The New York Times.
And, I opened up the paper. And I was reading, because I was
reading English, or, the way I do now. So, then I came to a
point where, you know, I read the paper from end to end; so,
so much reading there's to do. So, then I see photographers
wanted, this and that, and so on, so I read where it was
telling me about how much they pay and so on. I didn't pay
too much attention to it, because--so, anyway, it was New

York. So, when I came to Philadelphia, you know, and oh yes, and so what happened is this. I didn't know about the American newspapers, so I was reading a newspaper, two cents, but it had a few pages. So, one fellow says to me, "Give me your newspaper." So, "All right, here." Two-page paper; took another two, two pages off. And then I was going all over the boat, he had number eleven, and he had number nine, and I started reading, and it says, "continued at page twelve," and I have eleven, and he has twelve, and so, that's how I learned about American newspapers. Well, I took the newspaper and I went to, to New York. And it was The New York Times, on a Sunday, that I took, and I went to New York on Monday morning. And there was a lot of jobs, but I got onto a main street, let me see, Fifth Avenue, so I went [to the street] on Fifth Avenue, in New York, and the receptionist asked me, "What can I do for you?" I said, "I'm a photographer, a professional photographer, a retoucher," and so on. She says, "Just a moment." See, Philadelphia is a sleepy city. There, after a holiday, even there, Sunday, altogether closed, you know. But into New York on a Sunday, the city was alive! So, he says, "All right, come with me." So I went to see--"Where did you work before?" I said, "Philadelphia." So, he didn't ask me any questions, when I came, and so on,

because I spoke English. And he says to me, "Where did you work in Philadelphia?" And I said, "[Goldinsky] Studio." He says, "Oh!" because that was a well-known studio, catering to the four hundred, you know. So, he says, "Oh, all right. So, come with me." So, I went with him, he tried me out, and then the manager calls me in. He says, "All right, we'll pay you fifty dollars a week." So, all right. I thought, before Christmas, you know, now it's after Christmas, it's slower, so, I went there, and for a while, a week or two, and then I went to another studio, there was a better ad, I looked. So, it was a better pay, so I started working for another fellow, more or less a private studio, where the photographer was doing all the work except the retouching, and [. . .] did all the rest of the work. So, but it was a German Jew. And, German Jews don't like Russian Jews, Eastern Jews. I don't know for what reason. I wish I had that fellow with me today. A German Jew. I would tell him, "What happened to your relatives, huh?" He was a Jewish fellow. But German. And he was always, always, sort of, make me like I'm nothing. I got sick and tired of him. I needed a job, but I was working a few weeks for him, and I said to him one day, "I had enough," I said. And I started out with another fellow. He said, "All right, you'll come back to me." I said, "Not

me. You got the wrong guy," I said. I know too much. So, meanwhile I was invited to dinner by a party that I knew from Russia. And they landed in the United States before, a few months before. And somebody that I met, you know, on the boat, he had gave me the address; he said, "When you are there, when you are in New York," he says, "look them up." So, thereafter, I called them up, and I said, "It's Mr. Weise." "Oh! When did you come!?" I said, "Well, I--a long story," I said, "I'll tell you when I come to you." He said, "All right, come to dinner." So he invite me. I came there, to dinner. So, I came to--I took the train to Thirteenth Avenue, in Borough Park. And I got out of the station; it was huge, like another city, you know. I see stores, and the station--there are a lot of people, and so on. And then I see right in front, as I got out of the station, I see across the street, a big sign in the window, "Loft to let." Hmm--all right. Now, I went to see the people. They were two blocks away. And, I came there to dinner, we were talking about this and that. And, this fellow that I knew was a house painter. So, he says to me, "Well, what are you going to do?" I said, "Well, you know, I'm a photographer, and I'm going to look for work." I said, "I worked already, in Philadelphia, but now I want to see what I can do here, in New York. See, because I couldn't

find work in Philadelphia, after Christmas." So, he says,
 "Well, you'll find work here, I suppose." So, I said, "Yes,
 matter of fact, I'm working now, but I had a fight with him
 and I told him I quit." So, and by the way, I said, "I see a
 sign there in front of the, in front of the station, 'Loft
 to Let.' I think I'll open a studio. Do you think it's a
 nice place there?" He says, "Not bad, I know the place,
 because I painted it out a couple of weeks ago." And I
 said, "How much you do you think rent I would have to pay?"
 It was, you know, new to me. He says, "Oh, I suppose you
 can get it for about forty dollars a week." I say, "I think
 I will take a chance, and--" So, he says, "Call up the
 landlord." He says, "I have his telephone. Here's the
 telephone." He says, "I know the landlord. I'll go with
 you." Called out the landlord, and he came out and took a
 look at the loft, one flight up, you know. The studios in
 those days, all the studios were one flight up. You know, we
 go back sixty years. So, he says to me, "Okay. [Meka] says
 that you are a newcomer. And so on, I'll give you a chance.
 Tell you what you'll do. You give me forty dollars rent, and
 your next rent will be three months later. I just want you
 to--to give you a start." He had that loft empty for years.
 The houses, homes, in the United States in those days, they were

built up so much, there were streets, whole streets, that were empty buildings, empty houses, you see. Borough Park was a section where it was just starting to build, you see. And that's where I landed. And I opened up a studio upstairs, and I stayed on that avenue. I moved downstairs the store, later on, but I stayed on that avenue sixty-two years.

ALLEE: Wow.

WEISE: In business. And one day, I went, after I stayed and was established for a while, you know, so that means by 1928, I was in business already, and everything all right, so I figured, well, I'll go to Philadelphia, visit my relatives. Because they were laughing at me. I'm a roll-around, this and that, "You'll starve, this way, but you have a job over here [. . .]" I said, "Uncle, don't compare yourself to me. I'm an American. I'm not in Russia. I speak the language, I write well." I said, my spelling is excellent. I said, I'm well-read, you see, and so on. And, the next thing, I said, I'm going to do is marry an American girl. He says, "No, an American girl will not marry you." I say, "I'll find a girl that will marry me," I said. Because, I'll tell you, another day, another day, say about, American girls like

fellows that are slim and tall and so on, and I'm [state],
and I'm--so, he says, "Maybe." So, one day I came to
Philadelphia and, to visit my relatives, and he knows a girl.
I looked at her, and I say "Gee, that's the kind of girl I
like to marry." And there she is. You want to know what she
looked like? Just a moment. You asked for something
about--what was about it I want to finish? I said, oh yes, so
I said to myself, "This is the kind of girl I like to marry."
So, I started a conversation with her. She says, "I never saw
you before here." Because she was in [those] house, she used
to come in. I said, "No, I'm a New Yorker." So she says,
"Well, are you coming in from New York often?" I say, "No, this
is the first time in five years." She says, "Well, anyway, when
are you coming again?" I said, "I may be coming here next
week." I said, she says, "All right." I said, "Well, meet
me at the Pennsylvania Station," I mean, in Philadelphia.
So, anyway, she says, "Write to me." So, when I came home
that day, so I went and I wrote her a letter. And told her
all kinds of things, this and that. And I told her that
"I'll meet you on Fri--" in those days, photographers used to
be closed Friday. So, "I'll be there Friday." So then, when
I came there, she was waiting at the Pennsylvania Station.
And in Philadelphia. And well, we went for a walk in the

park, and this and that. And, she says, "Well, when are you coming in again?" I said, "I'll be here next Friday. I'll see you next Friday?" She says yes. Says "All right." Then, a couple of times, she comes from a family who was the kind--you know, in those days--was girls were not so free, like today, you know. Oh, the mother--the parents wouldn't even let her work. You know, the parents, the sons are all doctors, lawyers, and so on. But the girls--nothing. All sisters, nothing. And so I say, "What are you doing?" She said, "Nothing." She say, "My mother wouldn't let me work."

ALLEE: We're just about to run out of the tape.

WEISE: And we celebrated the twenty-fifth and then the fiftieth anniversary, and I put my four daughters through college, and one lives upstate New York. She's a teacher, some voice and piano.

ALLEE: This is the end of interview number 190 with Joseph Weise.
This is Debra Allee and it is now 2:55.