UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

ELLIS ISLAND ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee:	Lou Winnick
Interviewer:	Willa Appel
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APPEL: This is Willa Appel, I'm speaking with Lou Winnick on Friday, June 6, at eleven o'clock, and we're talking about Lou's experience emigrating from Romania in 1922. This is interview number 191. Lou, you had been telling me that you were a month old when you came over to the United States.

WINNICK: No, eleven months old.

APPEL: Eleven months old. Okay, so, whether or not you actually remember it yourself, can you describe a little bit of the circumstances about why you left your home in Russia, where that was, and your life.

WINNICK: My parents fled Russia, because it was undergoing some of the severe stresses of war, civil war, and pogroms, and there were several killings in the family, and other unhappy events, and they really flood us refugees into Romania. And they got no farther than Bucharest, because

of lack of money and lack of visa to America. They spent nearly three years in Bucharest, awaiting both to come from relatives in America. And, in March 1922, they got a visa, which allowed them to depart for America. They went by train from Bucharest to Antwerp, Belgium, and embarked on the S.S. Finlandia, arrived in America sometime in March 1922.

APPEL: And, if you could tell me a little bit more about Russia, where you lived, what your father's profession was.

WINNICK: I was born in Romania so I have no experience in Russia itself, and no memory even of Romania at all, at that age. But my father, my father was a small trader in Russia, and I recall kitchen table conversations, he's always trading flour, and sugar, or other staples. Apparently all his relatives were traders as well. It was not a family, either, of any scholarship, or any fixed business, but they sort of made out.

APPEL: And where in Russia?

WINNICK: My father was born near Kiev, and my mother was born in Odessa. But, Odessa was the place they settled down after marriage. That's where my brother was born, in Odessa.

APPEL: Do you have any memory of the ship crossing?

WINNICK: Only stories my family told me. It was a rough crossing, and everybody was seasick. Everybody was seasick. And my brother, who was then two, became the favorite of the crew, and fed him more food than anyone else got on the ship, on this thing. So he was one of the few happy passengers on an otherwise not very happy cruise.

APPEL: What time of year was it?

WINNICK: March.

APPEL: It was March--it was rough.

WINNICK: Rough, yes, it was a rough sea, I guess.

APPEL: And you were traveling steerage?

WINNICK: Oh, yeah, yeah. If there was a lower class than steerage, we were it, but, I think that was about it.

APPEL: Then, arriving on Ellis Island. Did the family have any difficulties through?

WINNICK: No, no, there was no health problem on the part of anybody. It was a very healthy family. At least, there was no stories of any snags on Ellis Island. You know, they always referred in [. . .] of Ellis Island as Castle Garden. [Castle] Garden. And that goes back to a previous incarnation, when [Castle] Garden was a port of entry, but it took me a while before I realized the fact that Ellis Island was the place they were all talking about.

APPEL: And, were you met?

WINNICK: Yeah, my father--the most important relative then was my father's older brother, Paul Winnek. He was the one who supplied the money for us to make the transport. And, he met them, he met us, and then I get vague after that. But it was my mother's family, her family consisted of essentially cousins, in New York, who adopted my father, for his first job training. And they were three or four brothers named [Slate], who all were in retail fish businesses. In Brooklyn and Manhattan. And they got to my father on a course to become a fish dealer himself. And he took training learning how just to be a fish cleaner. He came home reeking of foul, fishy smells every night.

But also brought home tremendous quantities of fish with him, too, which I told you about.

APPEL: So when you arrived at Ellis Island Paul Winnek met--

WINNICK: Met the family, I understand.

APPEL: Where did you go?

WINNICK: Then we went to Brooklyn, because the fish store my father was to take training in was in Brooklyn, and here my first memories in life began. We lived in a cold water flat with an outdoor toilet. And literally, my first memory of life was lying in my father's arms with a blue bulb overhead, on a brown couch. I don't know why that image has always survived. My second memory was my father taking me to the toilet on cold winter nights and being pretty unhappy about that whole experience, as outdoor toilets are--And I still--the house still exists, on [Mondeen] Street, in Williamsburg, right near the water. And, that was a nineteenth century form of construction, I learned later on, the four-story, the three- and four-story walk-ups frame, not masonry, surrounding a courtyard, and in the center of the courtyard was an outhouse, to be shared by all families. They

had--the Lower East Side used to be built that way, before the new law tenement came along.

APPEL: And, why did you go to Williamsburg rather than the Lower East Side?

WINNICK: It was cheaper. My parents--my father--the training store was in Brooklyn itself. Transportation was always a tremendous stress to everybody. Couldn't [. . .] The simple act of taking the subway to go from Brooklyn to go to Manhattan was a strain. It was all right when you [meet] fixed points, about the fifth time you went, you know, you went on this train, you got off at that stop, but if you had to go someplace different, it was a great strain. Early years of life was full of memories, being lost and wild in the Bronx trying to visit cousin [Buzzy] someplace, on Mount Pleasant Avenue, something, helplessly lost, trying to find it.

APPEL: If you wouldn't mind telling me, as you did before, informally, about what life was like for an immigrant family in Williamsburg.

WINNICK: Short, dirty, and brutish. It was poverty and anxiety, are

the two words that come to the mind. I mean, people just did not have money, and a penny was an important sum to a child. Uh, there's always an anxiety--you couldn't pay rent by the end of--we paid rent by the week then--couldn't pay the rent by the end of the week. There wouldn't be enough money to buy food. My father's salary was minuscule, at that time. And, the strange alien world we lived in with no language at all, to be confronted with, with a civilization which you really couldn't relate to, and there was a--fear and anxiety were always the word. Your fear of being starved, of being put out of your house or starving, and dealing with authorities. People used to always have [fines, fines] on their heads, my mother, notably my mother. There was a great deal of mutual sharing among the immigrants. This was a very, very mixed immigrant neighborhood, and I--in which everybody was an immigrant, with the possible exception of some old Irish families. It was not far from a brewery center, where some, where a lot of the Irish got employment as driving wagons, horse-drawn wagons. And, the second move was on the same block, into a better grade of housing, which was then still a cold-water flat, but it had an indoor toilet. That was a big improvement over the outdoor toilet. And the arrangement there was three families to a floor, sharing the same toilet. And the other two families were immigrants, too. One was

Russian. Ukrainian, not Jewish. And the other was an Italian family named [Piazza]. And, my mother could converse with the Ukrainians, because they both were fluent in Ukrainian. But not with the Italians; a lot of sign language went on. But there was a lot of mutual sharing, a lot of mutual babysitting. And, taking deliveries for each other, exchange of food. And my father bringing home these large quantities of fish, beyond our--way beyond any needs. We would give Mrs. Piazza some fish for some favor she had done, and no sooner did we do that than it would come back that night, something that Mrs. Piazza had made, which was, I recall once, spaghetti meatballs, [and salad] it looks, this tomato thing, garlic, smelled terrible--like no smell I ever had. And my mother and father both thanked her warmly for this thing, but promptly throw it in the garbage, the garbage pail was blocks away, so Mrs. Piazza would not see this. It was not kosher, and even if it were kosher, it was so [. . .], we would never eat this food. There was a lot of anxiety. You didn't know whether he was ever going to make out in his job training. There was schools to confront. By then, my brother was reaching school age, and I recall report cards that had to be answered, and signed, and spelling lists that had to be pasted in the back of a book. They couldn't cope with these English instructions that they had. And, one of the saviors of

this anxiety-ridden culture that I mentioned to you earlier, too, was this Metropolitan Life Insurance Company agent who came around and collected his twenty-five-cent and fifty-cent weekly insurance premiums, mostly for burial insurance. There was a high death rate, particularly for children, in those days. And when he came Friday morning for his collection--because Friday is payday, and he came for his collection--that occasion became more than a payment. He sat at the kitchen table and you dumped on him all the things you had during the week from authorities, you know. Letters from school, or something from the immigration service, they wanted some kind of documentation.

APPEL: But since there were so many immigrant groups, did this Metropolitan Life Insurance collector speak many different languages?

WINNICK: No, he could handle, he could handle [. . .] most of the Jewish people, but how he did the others, I don't know, but [. . .] and sign language, you know. And then, by then, too, you must remember too, some of the younger kids began to pick up English. And there was a progression between the English language--the kids of six could speak better English than the kids of four, and the kids of two. So, my

brother and some of the other kids began to pick up English on the streets. Somehow, there was communication; he would advise on what the school people wanted or utility company wanted, or--and some warm friendships started with those insurance agents. One we had, Mr. Fagan, he was our insurance agent for twenty years afterwards. We bought a policy just to be nice to him.

APPEL: And--this is--I'm just following the same line of thought, but did the Piazza family also buy life insurance--

WINNICK: I don't remember that. I don't remember that. I don't remember in particular who bought. I mean, it was common among all the neighbors to have Mr. Fagan come around. There was always Mr. Fagan. They would wait for him. I imagine they probably did, because they had the same fear about the--I rather say the bad insurance that everybody else did. There was a rather high death rate. There was always a funeral a week on our block. I remember always hearses coming.

APPEL: Probably early children?

WINNICK: The children--diphtheria was a very big killer, in those

days. And, health authorities always coming to get you inoculated for this and that. Some--t.b. was also a great--then called consumption, tuberculosis was a later word. Consumption was a killer. But mostly, mature people rather than children. And there was a very high rate of tuberculosis. And people were always being advised to go visit the mountains, which meant Colorado, or New Mexico, Arizona. They couldn't afford it. And, so living in New York was almost a death sentence for them, in their view on this. They could survive if they could go to the mountains. But very few could afford to go to the mountains. Whether it's true or not scientifically, but one of the main causes of this high rate of tuberculosis, was the fur trade, and those people on the block who worked on the fur trade, were particularly vulnerable to tuberculosis. Apparently, the hairs of the furs and how it got in your lungs--probably totally unscientific. It was commonly believed that furs were--to become a furrier was to sign a death warrant, that you would--there was a high probability that you would die of tuberculosis.

APPEL: What about the immigrant families going to the Catskills?

WINNICK: That was much later. I mean, I knew nobody, I mean nobody, who ever spent any summer in the Catskills until much later

in our lives, and then there was--the Catskills themselves were a social hierarchy. Those, the first I've been to the Catskills, where people went to "Cookalings" and things. The hotel was, I mean, the hotel was a plush, luxurious device. You see, we went to some farmers's cottage and rented a room. And he was cooking [. . .], and you cook as you would at home, except you were at the Catskills.

APPEL: A "cookaling" means cook?

WINNICK: It means self--

APPEL: Cook alone?

WINNICK: Cook alone, but, literally, [believe it or not], you had self-sufficient cooking kitchen facilities. And the papa would come up, couldn't afford it every weekend, but maybe every second week. But that was [. . .] My mother probably didn't [go to] the Catskills for twenty years of her [. . .] The recreation of everybody I knew was just to Coney Island. You got on that subway car to go to Coney Island. And you don't know what density is like until you saw Coney Island in the 1920s on a July Sunday afternoon. I mean, it was belly-to-belly and jowl-to-jowl; it

was just--and, I still have this memory of trudging along with my mother and father, getting restless over at Stillwell Avenue, trudging along, and the first thing you notice was this huge sky. You didn't see sky in Williamsburg. This huge sky, and to this day, when I go to the beach, I have that sense of that big sky when I approach.

And the big fear for kids in Coney Island was getting lost, which happened all the time. I mean, if you ever strayed away from your family's camp for more than ten feet, you never found your way back again through all the density. Being picked up by a cop was a very common thing; they had a whole pound full of lost kids out, under the boardwalk, and your parents claimed you, your parents came to claim you.

APPEL: And would your family go on its own, or would other people from--

WINNICK: No, they went on our own. Sometimes we'd agree to meet some other relative, and be looking to find them. It was a picnic as well as a beach, and they brought abundant quantities of food with them, and it was more than casual sandwiches, it was very large packages of chicken, chopped meat, and potatoes, and endless wrappings. And the other thing that

comes to my mind is the East European code of hygiene was not very well developed, so my parents would throw the chicken bones and paper wrappings right in the sand, not even in a basket. And enduring the hard stares and anger that some other people around us, for being dirty, you know.

APPEL: But you were aware of that as a child.

WINNICK: I was increasingly aware as I grew older. I'm sure as a child I was not aware of the anger part, the angry reaction, that must have come later on.

APPEL: Were you embarrassed? When you became aware of it?

WINNICK: Increasingly embarrassed as I got older, about a lot of Old World habits and most excruciatingly embarrassed, was not the hygiene, but English, and when upon some occasions, my mother thought I had to go to school, because they had--Louie was the smartest kid in the class, and was always doing this and that--and they invited--and getting parts in school plays was a function of being smart, not being a good actor, so I would always get a lead

role in some play, and they came to see the play, and the teacher would make small talk with them. It was terrible; they couldn't understand each other. I would be very embarrassed; my toes would curl, and I'd be ashamed, I wished they wouldn't come.

APPEL: Were there other very European habits that they kept up?

WINNICK: [Settle]. [Settle] was a custom, shopping. You know, there was no supermarkets in those days, you should be shopping in little grocery stores. And you always found one grocery store, Mr. [Scarborough] I remember, and you bought everything on [settle], you use credit. And it was all ledgers, and Mr. [Scarborough] took out a white piece of paper, folded it in half, and every time you bought a can of salmon, a loaf of bread, or seedless pumpernickel was the great bread then, he'd mark down on the [settle]. And every Saturday--my father would be paid on Friday--and every Saturday, we'd go--they would send me with the money, because I was the big counter--to settle Mr. Scarborough off for the week's bills. Without fail, there was always a big dispute about the bill. I'd come back, I'd say, "Seven dollars and twenty-two cents for the week's groceries." She'd say,

"What?! Seven dollars and twenty-two cents, impossible! It couldn't be more than four dollars. What did we buy?" You know. We'd go back and forth, and Mr. Scarborough would pull out all of his papers, white paper, "You bought this, and you bought that," and three or four crackers that [Lee] bought for himself, and which would come out, and finally, back and forth, they would settle, Mr. Scarborough made a mistake or two, himself, on the thing, and the bill is settled on Saturday afternoon, when I finally paid Mr. Scarborough, he would take out a--not an Oreo, but a chocolate marshmallow cookie, which was one of my favorites, and he would give me a cookie to eat. Other European habits--a tremendous amount of visiting around among relatives, and we never had phones. We never had phones at all. So that relatives--you would visit or be visited by relatives completely without notice. And, it was very common, Sunday afternoon, sometimes six people knock on your door, come and food was always the first source of hospitality. So you had to go running out to Mr. Scarborough's grocery store, buy food, and thank God you had a [settle] because you had no money. And bring back huge quantities of sour cream and eggs and cheese, and my mother would make up, hand make blintzes.

And we would do the same, visiting people in the Bronx, as I said, almost always getting lost in the process of doing

that. And nobody had phones to call, to find out how to get there, anyway, so we were always asking strangers, depended on the kindness of strangers.

APPEL: What about school?

WINNICK: School--nobody progressed until my father [managed to] scrape up some capital and he started a little business of his own, and this was on the edges of Borough Park.

APPEL: Fish business.

WINNICK: Fish business. This was a modest business. They then had--the customers no longer--with one exception I can think of--they had large they called them "markets," they were stores, little, a hundred feet deep and maybe a hundred feet wide, and they were subdivided into ten or twelve food specialties. There was always an appetizing counter, and a butcher, and a grocer, and a dairy counter, and a fish counter. The fish counter was always way in the back 'cause it smells. So my father's fish business was a fish counter on Fort Hamilton Parkway and Fiftieth Street in a market. And so this is now on the edge of Borough Park, and to be close to

work--it was very long hours--we tried to rent an apartment in Borough Park, and the first one we rented was on Twelfth Avenue and Thirty-Sixth Street, twice the rent of our Williamsburg apartments, and the only way we could afford that was by becoming janitors of the building, it was a four-family building. And they cut the rent in half, if you'd--these were all coal-burning furnaces in those days, which meant hauling a lot of coal and ashes and my mother would wash the floors. Both of them went to work in the fish store most of the day, and come home at night and do the janitorial work, or in the mornings. There was a lot of hard work in those days. And, so I was enrolled--my first school was a school on the edge of Borough Park, on P.S. 79, and the school district that [had] my house, school was on Avenue C and East Second Street. It's the school where Mayor Koch also went some years later, P.S. 179. And 179 itself was itself the heart of the very middle class neighborhood. My classmates were essentially middle class, always Jewish, not one hundred percent, but mostly Jewish kids. So, we were put into a middle class, a lower middle class in a year, not because we really could afford it, but by set of circumstances drove us there, because on--otherwise I probably would have spent years and years as so many of our immigrant friends did, in

Williamsburg itself. [. . .] in Williamsburg well into World War Two.

APPEL: So, what happened with school?

WINNICK: So, I went to school, yeah, and they took me to enroll, and [when in the office] of the school, one of the assistant principal decided that my English wasn't good enough. In Williamsburg, Yiddish was the language of the street, mainly. In the home, and--it was our mother tongue. And English was--we were gaining English, but not too badly. Decided that my English wasn't good enough to be enrolled in my proper class, and they told me to wait another semester. So I was enrolling--and I was rather late already for my, for my semester. So by the time I was actually enrolled in school, I was nine or ten months older than the average of my class. And English was a stress in school from day one. I was living with these mostly middle class kids who were all native, virtually all native born kids, in English speaking families, and the school system then was heavily dominated by the Irish, mostly spinsters, and the school was full of Rigleys and Delaneys and Walters and Miss Agnes Delaney was my first teacher. And she was rather sympathetic to my

plight. But English came hard, and it came swiftly but it came hard, and in school itself I made all kinds of blunders in the use of the language, and in this early class, one session when we were supposed to have the dedication of objects, she held up a string, and I was quick, smart, I was so quick to identify, and I said, "Strickle," and she--and the class laughed, obviously, and I was deeply embarrassed, blushed, had my head under the table. And then, at another session, she had a picture of a water tap, a faucet, and I said, "Oh, a clunt," and I sound vulgar or something, and everybody laughed again. And she was amused by my embarrassment more than by anything else. That was a nice person. And she adopted me as--she gave me books to read. And one day in the schoolyard, during lunch hour, she asked me to--oh, she used to make me monitor; I erased the blackboards, became one of her pets. One day in the schoolyard, she asked me to get her a sandwich for lunch, and I was honored by the request, and she wanted, she asked me to get her a smoked salmon sandwich. And I had no idea what the hell a smoked salmon sandwich might be. And was too embarrassed to ask her to explain, and I just went, anxiety-ridden, went off to get it. And, I went to the wrong delicatessen first. She hadn't used the word delicatessen, she meant appetizing store. And I went to the appetizing

store, and I asked for the smoked salmon sandwich, timorously, and to my relief the man started cutting from this large salmon. I said, "My God, a lox, smoked salmon's lox!" And then, "What a language!" And I came back, and she gave me--she had two pennies on her leather-gloved finger, and she gave me these two pennies, and I was so conned by these two pennies I never spent them, I took them home. "Miss Delaney gave me two pennies!" Teachers were, uh, I can't tell you what tremendous authority figures they were in those days. I mean, nobody would talk back to a teacher. In the--I mean, death penalty for anybody who was--a teacher would bring somebody to the assistant principal--that was--I can't imagine, the school system now, in comparison with that. But teachers were great authority figures.

APPEL: Did the kids call you a "greenhorn"? Did you--

WINNICK: No, no. I can't think of [. . .] There wasn't any mockery about that. I was learning fast, and getting smart, and I don't think I any particular hangups with anybody. People were friendly. There wasn't any part of that at all. There was more my own embarrassment than any kind of mockery.

APPEL: And you were dressed as a--similarly--

WINNICK: Yeah, similarly, probably more poorly, but similarly. Knickers, high socks, knickers were the way you went to school. Cheap leather bag--cheap oilcloth bag you carry as a--with a pencil box. All of this impressed me no end because I had not seen a pencil box before,and this leather bag which looked like luxury to me, you hung it on your shoulder and went to school. It was a very long walk. We were probably at the edge of the school district, and we crossed. The school, East Second Street and Avenue C, is not far from Ocean Parkway, which one of the prime neighborhoods. So my eyes were opened up to all of the nice houses that people lived in. There's a whole world out there.

APPEL: Do you remember what you thought about it? Or what you felt about it?

WINNICK: It was just a different world, just a different world. I never once--it was important for you to learn the first name of your teacher, it was a special secret that you carried also. With luck, you might find where a teacher lived. And once we found out my third grade teacher lives on Ocean Parkway. And we visited, sneakily visited

this place, and here is this lobby with furniture, and vases in it, and Greek urns, and an elevator! And we were so thrilled, to ride in an elevator. An elevator was one of the symbols of luxury of a kind I can't describe now. Even in these nondescript six-story buildings that were just common as anything in Brooklyn then. It was total luxury. And I remember visiting one of the few affluent relatives we had, on Eastern Parkway, also lived in a six-story elevator. Even more luxurious than--what was the name of that teacher--Miss Post. Mrs. Post lived in. This was a huge thing, they even had a fountain in the courtyard spraying away. This was enormous, I mean, just--you could see such wealth and affluence. Walk into an apartment with a twenty-one-foot living room, it looked like a baronial hall to us.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

APPEL: This is the beginning of side two of the interview with Lou Winnick. This is the second side of the interview with Lou Winnick. When, in describing these luxurious apartment buildings, did it, did you think you that wanted to attain them?

WINNICK: No. I was out of my realm of discourse. It just was another world, looking at Mars, as far as I know. Except for this one uncle of my mother's living on Eastern Parkway, that I probably didn't even knew--even these middle class kids that I knew in my school, most of them lived in just walk-ups and a few fathers had automobiles, but this was a level of luxury beyond any of our dreams. We were getting poorer, not richer, because my father's business failed rather quickly. And now I realize, in retrospect, that the Depression overtook us. He started business in '27, and by '29 it wasn't going very well, and [it probably] have not gone very well if the Depression had not hit, but he wasn't a very keen businessman. And we were getting desperately poor, trying to borrow money to keep the business afloat, and, among the ways of buying, my mother would, on two occasions, wrap me and my brother up, took a bus to Philadelphia. She had a large number of relatives in Philadelphia, lower middle class to middle class. And, and seriatim, she would go visit all those relatives and try to borrow some money for--spend a couple of days with each of these relatives. And one of the great shames of my life was, was my mother asked me to borrow a dollar or two from the

mothers of my friends. That was a deep shame, deep shame for me, to go knocking on the door of somebody else's mother's house to borrow a dollar or two. We always paid back, but it was a terrible thing. But, she didn't know very many people herself, and--

APPEL: Did she learn English?

WINNICK: She learned English much better--much more rapidly than my father did. Spoken English. And she could hear, so that, she was much better at conversing with tradespeople than my father. My father was just helpless on English. And they both had this retail fish store where Yiddish was probably spoken three-quarters of the time, both by the customers and by my parents. But every now and then someone did not speak Yiddish or some truck driver or the ice man came in and you had to speak English. My mother would do the speaking. My father was terrible. But she could not--she never learned how to write English. And, my father could barely sign his name in English, I held his hand and moved his arm around.

APPEL: Did the have, as far as you know, expectations of what America was going to be like?

WINNICK: I think their highest aspiration was to have a little fish store that yielded them forty dollars a week in income. I think that their dreams didn't go beyond that at all. And the kids would finish high school. I mean, college is something to be not even thought of. Both my brother and sister were high school dropouts. We didn't even know anybody who went to college. I remember, even later on, when somebody on the block was accepted for City College, it was sort of an event. High school was the big educational focal point of--

APPEL: So, when they left, they were simply fleeing, they had no choice. They felt they had no choice.

WINNICK: They were fleeing--they were fleeing death, I mean, no doubt about it. I don't think there was much--such a higher--you know, the golden opportunity of America, as it was, a push from fate, a horrible fate there.

APPEL: And the family members would have been killed--

WINNICK: My mother's younger brother, she talked frequently about that. And her father, both of them were killed. And she kept--don't ask me how this happened, again, I don't know

how scientific it was--he was killed by being shot up with a rusty nail. I can't imagine any gun shooting a rusty nail, but this is what I always kept hearing. And, a lot of memories, too, survived. When we were leaving Bucharest, she would tell me, I slept--it was still cold, winter there--and on top of the stove, and I had no image of how a baby could sleep on top of a stove, and, but so it always came out the same, until '65, since 1964. My wife and I went to Bucharest, some passing by on business. And in a major park was an open air museum, and they had a dozen or so models of peasant housing, you know, little cottages, and in every one, in the kitchen, was a big stove, and on top of the stove was an alcove where the sign says babies and old people slept. So she was right, my mother. No, there were no aspirations of wealth at all. And whatever fantasies they had, mostly my mother's was expressed by going to the movies frequently. This was the golden age of Hollywood, 1930s. And, looking at all these art deco apartments that Barbara Stanwyck or Carole Lombard were sporting around in. She would go to the movies three or four times a week, and it was mostly fantasy.

APPEL: And, how did they--do you know how they felt about being in America?

WINNICK: I guess, I don't know, a few little things, about all I could see was poverty and tragedy and being let out on the street and there was very frequent letters back to relatives in Russia, which, and letters coming in. Because my mother couldn't read, my father would read aloud so I would hear some stories too, and all the feeling was, "There was [. . .] in America, but it's even worse in Russia, and poor as we were, and poor as we were--by then the gates were closed so nobody else could come over from Russia--and poor as we were, we always found somehow a five dollar bill to put into an envelope. Five dollars translated into rubles was a huge sum of money. But more often than money, we would send them all our second-hand clothes, which they didn't wear. They would sell it, I mean, a pair of real American leather shoes was worth--was priceless, in Russia. Letters of gratitude would come back. I had a sense that if they felt grateful about America it was only because it was so much worse, still so much worse where they were. It was not a, it was not the pattern of "All my sons will be doctors and lawyers" type of thing--

APPEL: More that this was a place of golden opportunity.

WINNICK: Yeah. [. . .] was a [. . .] kind of thing. And what was

the phrase about Columbus, Columbus should drop dead, you know, the fact that Columbus had discovered America was the worst thing that ever happened to them, and, there was an idiom in Yiddish, Columbus--I wish I could remember; I don't. I'm sure some Yiddish would remember; it was a curse--it was a curse against them.

APPEL: Wasn't there a song about that?

WINNICK: There might have been, too. I don't remember the song.

APPEL: Were they eager to become American citizens?

WINNICK: Yes. Well, because all kinds of things depended upon becoming a citizen in the end. And, in high school, for example, I couldn't get a scholarship. By then, the state had these Regents scholarships--unless you were a citizen. You had to be a citizen to do that. And you couldn't vote; it was a shame not to vote, and I don't know what else. Even getting bank loans for my father was harder because he was not a citizen. So, the struggle was to become a citizen, and it was a shame because people better educated than my father were becoming citizens all around him, all the other immigrants. So, we plugged away at becoming

citizens, and the test, in those days, was heavily on the Constitution. And, so many memories of sitting around these winter nights around the kitchen table--the kitchen was the center of all life, you cleared the table after dinner and--all recreation--we had no radios or T.V., we had no radios even, and storytelling and just sitting around and playing cards at the kitchen table. And we'd take out these little moth-eaten paper Constitution, and start teaching my father the Articles and the Amendments, and it was hard, it was very hard going. The Constitution.

APPEL: You did the teaching?

WINNICK: I did the teaching. I was the scholar in the family, I was the smart kid in the family. Neither--my sister was not--she was born by then, yeah. Neither of them were scholarly inclined.

APPEL: And how old were you when you were trying to teach him?

WINNICK: He got his papers in thirty-six, so, and the struggle went on for years before--so I was fifteen when he got his papers, and then I must have started teaching him when I was eleven, twelve years old. And I didn't understand the Constitution

myself, I mean, parts of it I did, but the section on the electoral college we fight over until like--still don't understand, still don't understand, you know, the electoral college is trash. And I remember--and whether it was a mark of reprisal or something that was beyond our mutual intellect, and we came to one section about the--one of the amendments, Bill of Rights, that there couldn't be any mandatory quartering of troops, and my father said, "What does that mean?" and I says, you know, "In the old days they could force the soldiers to live in your house because they didn't have any barracks," and he looked around and saw this little tiny apartment, and said, "Well, where would they live? What a silly idea!"

APPEL: So you were really a very young boy when you were trying to teach your parents the Constitution.

WINNICK: I was the mainstay of my family. I should emphasize that more, too. I was having--I learned English and I learned it fast, and I was a great reader in the family, and I was probably the only one who read a newspaper, and my mother became increasingly dependent on me for all kinds of things that normally a parent would do. For example, I would handle the applications for bank loans for my father, which were

numerous and frequent. As frequently rejected. And in [. . .] to get a loan, there was something called the Morris Plan then, which were small loans from an industrial bank. Morris Plan is a slice--the building still stands on Thirteenth Avenue. You had to get co-makers to get this loan. These loans were not very large, two hundred dollars, perhaps.

And I was the one who went around to all the relatives in the Bronx, because I could travel by then, and, to get them to sign as co-makers, and to explain the fine print. A co-maker is an endorser of a loan, so that my father's credit was not sufficient. So, some relative would have to go as co-maker, which means you take responsibility for the loan. And so I would be the one to go around to these relatives' houses to get these things signed. I was the one that always went to the gas company to complain about the bill, because the bill was always too high. And I was the one who dealt with landlords, the real estate agents, I could read the contract or the lease or speak English. And by then, I had taken over the function of reading letters for everybody else. So I became, in a sense, sort of a junior father of the family, because of my early attainment of English. And my mother, I think, also trusted my judgment, even about the business--some business--they tried to learn the business about three times,

there was a whole succession of attempts and failures--even sometimes with business decisions, she would ask my advice--buy this kind of fish or that kind of fish, how to price it. And one time when George Bundy was telling somebody how good my judgment was and how much everybody trusted my judgment--that goes back a long time. My mother thought I had good judgment.

APPEL: And, do you--as they became older in America, does that feeling of cynicism in America gone up--

WINNICK: No, that changed, no, that became--and they became Americans, and thought of no other culture. And don't forget, they always lived in neighborhoods with people very much like themselves, though, so that there was always sort of--they weren't really alienated in any way. I don't know how they would have felt if they lived in a small town, so in Borough Park, or several different points in Borough Park that we lived in, you know, the half mile around us was eighty percent of the people was very much like them, you know, immigrants and new immigrants, struggling poor, and--

APPEL: But in Borough Park--wasn't it more Jewish immigrants, Eastern European Jews, rather than the mixture that--

WINNICK: No, no--Borough Park--well, no. We were on the edges of Borough Park. It was still the low rent district, and while our particular block was probably eighty-five percent Jewish, one block behind us, Thirty-Seventh Street, was almost eighty-five percent Italian. Then, when we progressed a little better, my brother started working after school and I started working after school, and we had a little bit more money, we moved to Fifty-Fourth Street to a better house, then, but being janitors, still janitors, though. And Fifty-Fourth Street is near Fort Hamilton Parkway, is the southern end of Borough Park, really, and if you go to Fifty-Fifth, Fifty-Sixth Street, it's getting almost exclusively Italian. And Fifty-Fourth Street was still a block of mixed, so there were, in a block of perhaps forty houses, six or eight were Italian. The Italians, curiously, were almost all owners of the buildings. Always had backyards, always raised tomatoes, and some grapes. And the Jews almost always nearly rented from them. And it was some very good, even there, some good relationships with the Italians. And on fifty-Fourth Street, my closest friend was an Italian kid, Nick, Nick [Avina], which, later on, I learned, meant "oats." And, we became very close, and I spent a lot of time at his house, he spent a lot of time at my

house. And, he would ask me, we would always ask, "Walk, walk me someplace," you know? Like "walk him to"--we shopped in a Jewish grocery store; he shopped in A & P, and we would go into the A & P and there was a horrible smell, which I recognized later to be bacon, it was an alien smell. He would buy ham and bacon and would be eating the ham on the way home from the store, and he would offer me a piece, and if he had offered me direct, I couldn't eat it, it was something I wouldn't put in my mouth, even. And one time, it was a warm interpersonal relationship, one-on-one, but there was still a lot of ethnic separation, and to the Jews, the Italians were so, well, an inferior cast, and [. . .] were an inferior cast, and my father would pass a church and spit, as he was always--he never broke that rule. And, while they took my friendship with Nicky Avina because he was a nice lad kind of thing, they didn't encourage too much. Nicky Avina once took me to his sister's communion at a local Catholic church, and it was the first time I had ever entered a Catholic church, and I went out of friendship. I felt terribly alienated, this incomprehensible mass going on, on the other side, and the smell of incense, all these strange people with white robes on.

APPEL: Did you go to synagogue, were you trained?

WINNICK: I went--every Jewish boy went after school to prepare for Bar Mitzvah. And you went at least twice a week or three times a week for two or three hours. And I went to Mr. Joseph Weissberg's little academy a couple of blocks away. And a poor family--poor as we were, you had--my mother had to pay for two kids taking this Bar Mitzvah training. It might have been three dollars a week. And, there again, I became the star of the class, and ran away with all the prizes in Hebrew and my mother and my father were proud. But we were indifferent synagogue goers; we certainly went all the high holidays, and some of the low holidays. But decreasingly went on Saturday. My father worked very hard Monday through Friday, and Saturday he really was tired. He must have worked sixteen hours a day. And he really was tired on Saturday. So we would go only on certain occasions, his parents' anniversary, you know, your side for his parents' anniversaries, or somebody else's Bar Mitzvah. And that brings us to the Bar Mitzvah. To how we trained for the Bar Mitzvah. And, everybody expected great things of me, and I was scared as hell. I was still, to this day, making public speeches. And, I got up and droned something. I don't know what it was, and they throw nuts at you from the audience, and--women were separated in the synagogue, they

sit up in the balcony, and a large bag of nuts and fruits come hurtling down on your head, and they--later on, gifts. And my Bar Mitzvah gifts consisted of imitation leather, the collected works of Shakespeare, and a sister volume of the works of Leo Tolstoy, which I probably read and probably didn't understand one word of it. Also some fountain pens and thirty-five dollars cash. Five dollar bills in an envelope. And, and my uncle Paul was at this Bar Mitzvah, as he would be, and Paul saw this thirty-five dollars, these envelopes of cash, and took them away from me, because we had never paid him the nine hundred dollars that we owed him for those visas, passports from--that got us over to America kind of thing. And he was a kind man, but it was his wife who insisted on being paid. My mother never forgave her for taking away Bar Mitzvah presents. She was furious! She wouldn't visit, she wouldn't see them again for years afterwards.

APPEL: But it sounds--in fact, it almost epitomizes your story of you paying for your family's passage.

WINNICK: Yeah. These were gifts, band-my father, his attempts at business all failed, not one was successful. Each time they failed, he went back to work at the fish cleanery again at somebody else's store. So we were not the great

success story of the immigrants. His pay was very low paid industry, and I don't think at any time until World War Two, did he ever make as much as twenty dollars a week. So we always were on the edges of poverty and borrowing and making do. It didn't get a little better until my brother and I took part-time jobs after school and we went to work at a very early age, and he got a job at West End Florist for three dollars a week, but tips. And sometimes he'd make as much as seven or eight dollars a week in tips. That helped out an awful lot. But we never really overcame poverty until World War Two, when I became a coppersmith and making more money than I could spend. We got our first second-hand car and our first telephone. Windsor one-oh-three-six, and a better apartment--and no more janitor. But that was a very modest success. Schooling, they didn't expect anything. I mean, this is about the [. . .] compulsion towards education that Jewish immigrants have was nearly always true but not universally true. There was a tremendous amount of college going among my peer group, and [Schlemer] falling and grew up and went to jail; and Moshe [Ferem] his brother, older brother, was held up as a model for everybody around, 'cause he went to some vocational school at night, and he became not an accountant but a bookkeeper. That was a great thing. Somebody else became

a pharmacist. These were--the idea of success, doctors and lawyers, were not the subject of my generation. And I don't think at any time my parents even knew what class I was in, I mean, they had a smart boy on their hands, they were told he was getting prizes, all kinds of compliments from school authorities, but they didn't follow my career in any--I signed my own report cards all the time, and it wasn't until I got a Regents scholarship, a very prized thing to get in those days, they were very scarce, I think there was three hundred for the whole city and--a hell of a competition. And I was the only one in my school to get, in my high school, to get one, and the whole--and it was in The New York Times. The New York Times published a list of all the prize-winners, in this fine print, you had to have twenty-ten eye sight to see it, and there is Louis Winnick's name there, and the neighborhood was so proud. Wherever I went--the grocery store, and the candy store, and the butcher store, the shop--they all, "There's Louie Winnick!" My mother derived pleasure from their flattery rather than from any intense concern of her own. And, when I decided I was going to become a college enrollee, it was my decision, not hers, I mean, what school I went to was all mine, so except for attending graduations and things, she really had no

connection to my education. My brother--I don't think ten percent of my playmates went to college. And I was one--because nobody had any money anyway, and the big thing was to get into the city college, and getting into city college was a tough thing in those days. A lot of competitive tests. And I came out number three citywide on an entrance--I was never number one--and got--

APPEL: Pretty close.

WINNICK: Yeah, that was close--City College. But that was all my own decision. And this four hundred dollar scholarship that I got, a hundred dollars a year, payable fifty dollars a semester, was unnecessary because it was a free school, except for a couple of dollars library fee, there was nothing to pay for. So the fifty dollar check I would get--I never got a check in my name for fifty dollars before in my life--a very official-looking check--I would give it to my mother, just turn it over to my mother, that's all. That was a lot of money for her.

APPEL: I think we've pretty much covered it.

WINNICK: Yeah. There should be more about Ellis Island, but it's an

accident of birth, and--

APPEL: Well, what, I knew that, but what you were talking about was very interesting. It's the whole immigrant life.

WINNICK: It's a strand of it. And different strands. There's another strand, which is, you get much more in college books--this is about scholarship--you know, kids hanging around in the street and reading great books and--that was not my street, not till much later on. That didn't happen until age eighteen, seventeen or eighteen. Then the library card being your passport to the world. The cliche became a very true thing for us.

APPEL: But I also didn't realize how much inter-ethnic cooperation there was.

WINNICK: It was very peaceful. To this day, I repeat endlessly to everybody, the great genius of New York City is not the height of the skyscrapers and Wall Street and this thing, it's this tremendous diversity of ethnicities living in peace with each other. I mean, they may not like each other, but it's a very peaceful, cooperative thing. And most of the world is just the opposite of that. People

kill each other. New York was not bad at all. There was a lot of sharing, a lot of going to each other's Bar Mitzvahs and weddings. [. . .] the food, but--okay.

APPEL: Thanks very much. This is the end of the interview with Lou Winnick.