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DR. SAMUEL NELSON (KATZNELSON)
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APPLEBOME: This is Edward Applebome and I'm speaking with Dr. Samuel Nelson on Wednesday, January 26, 1985. We are beginning this interview at 2:35 PM. We are about to interview Dr. Nelson about his immigration experience from Russia in 1905. Dr. Nelson, can you tell me where and when you were born?

NELSON: I was born in the city of Mogilev which is now called Byelorussia, on October the 15, 1885. Eh, as I remember we lived in Mogilev for about ten years before my parents decided to go to a different place. And that place was Baku in the Caucasus.

APPLEBOME: Can you spell that for us?

NELSON: B-A-K-U. In the, which is now the Republic of Azerbaijan. It was rather a new territory, something like the West here in the United States and my father decided that he would like to go there and pursue his business occupation. His business was making shoe uppers, which was a new trade at that time in Russia. And he thought that a bigger city of Baku would be more conducive to better business so we migrated there. I was ten at that time, as I said. For about two years father was there conducting his business and then he had an accident, fell and died. My mother continued the little factory that we had an I had to go work. Uh, at the age of twelve or thirteen I started to work in our little shop. That went on until I was about fifteen, sixteen. I became involved in the young revolutionary movement in Russia going on at that time. And my mother, of course (he laughs) didn't approve of those things, as you would expect, and when I reached the age of about twenty she decided she would like me to emigrate because I was already threatened with arrest and it was a rather precarious way to carry on. So at that time you had to have an exit visa or a foreign passport. It was

called in order to go abroad. Well, of course, a young man couldn't get that because he was subject to military service. And so, but there was a quite extensive emigration movement in the country, so there were always ways of how to get people out. One of these was agents. There were agents in the border towns between Russia and Prussia at that time. They would arrange for a group of immigrants. They would arrange a small group of immigrants and would smuggle them across the border for a certain price. (he laughs) So that is what my mother arranged for me with an agent and I left Baku, travelled by train to a border town to Bialystock. And there the agent arranged for us to cross the border without passports. It was rather an adventure for a young man like myself. You had to run across borders and the guards shooting in the air I guess because they probably were also bribed to let you across. And so that's how I crossed the border. From there we went to, by train, to, uh, Hamburg, and from Hamburg to Bremen.

APPLEBOME: Who were you travelling with?

NELSON: No relatives, just other immigra . . . other

refugees who were stealing the border. Those who couldn't get passports. So that's how . . .

APPLEBOME: Were you willing to leave or was it mostly your mother's pressure?

NELSON: I really had ambiguous feelings about leaving. I was still interested in the revolutionary movement and i sort of didn't feel exactly like leaving it and running away, so to speak. But mother insisted and she was frightful, probably. And there wasn't any real feeling to run away from Russia at that time, as far as I'm concerned. And besides, I had a girlfriend so, who later became my wife, of course.

APPLEBOME: How did she feel about being left behind then?

NELSON: They decided to come after, after I left they decided also to come. My girlfriend, my mother, and my sister. In fact, a year later they came, exactly a year later they came over. My mother came with the two girls and both listed in their passports as daughters. Even my girlfriend was listed as daughter because it was easier to get passports that way. Uh, now I'm running ahead of myself, you wanted to hear about the trip more or less. Of

course in, like in all immigration centers I guess, the immigrants are subject to baths, delousing, and all kind of precautionary measures, I guess, before they can board the ship. Being immigrants, we traveled steerage, of course.

APPLEBOME: What city was it in that you were going to board your ship from?

NELSON: Bremen. The city of Bremen.

APPLEBOME: And you had travelled there by train.

NELSON: By train from the border to, to Hamburg to Bremen. And the steerage, I don't know whether you know, steerage is no cabins, just open holds in the ship with cots where the immigrants slept. And the food was very meager, it was soup and herring, two of the things that I disliked intensely. (he laughs) So I practically starved.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember if you met any people on the boat trip?

NELSON: Oh, well, I don't remember. I remember, but I don't think I had any relations with them as to remember exactly what. They were middle-aged people. I

don't think there were any as young as I was at that time, in the group that I was with.

APPLEBOME: How did you pass your time on the boat trip?

NELSON: Uh, naturally there was nothing for me to read. I was an avid reader but there was nothing to read on the boat. All you did is slept as much as you could and recovering from sea sickness for several days. The trip took about eleven days.

APPLEBOME: What were you travelling with? What baggage, what had you brought with you?

NELSON: I had a very, just the suit I had on, and a small valise with my, with some underwear, that's about all. Very light. Now we, uh, there's nothing much to tell about the trip over than I used to watch the second class passengers and envy them, of course. (he laughs) Their food was better, their accommodations were much better. Steerage was a very miserable way to travel. I wouldn't want to repeat it. (he laughs) Finally we arrived at New York Harbor, it happened to be on the 4th of July, 1905. Of course, I read a lot, in when I was in Russia yet, about America, the Indians, some

historical novels, and so on. And when I heard the shooting I imagined that the Indians are shooting. I heard the 4th of July celebration shootings and imagined it was the Indians, of course. And the same day, I believe, a boat took us to Ellis Island.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when your boat came in?

NELSON: Yes, I remember seeing it. Yeah. I think the Statue was only about two years old at that time in 1905, I believe. If you know, I think it was erected in 1903.

APPLEBOME: I think it was before that but it's not important.

NELSON: I believe so, if my recollection is correct. Anyway, uh, the memories of Ellis Island are very meager because I didn't spend much time there. Ellis Island was considered by everybody, by all travellers, by all immigrants as a purgatory, something you had to go through. It's an ordeal . Because there were so many rejections for, you know, for physical defects.

APPLEBOME: You had heard about this before you came over?

NELSON: Oh, yes, I heard of that.

APPLEBOME: Who had you heard from?

NELSON: Well, rumor (he laughs) I guess. Or maybe some of the immigrants that were coming perhaps. But you have to get through it because they rejected quite a few for physical defects. Particularly trachoma, which is an eye disease. And of course mental illness, I believe, was excluding immigrants. Well, I passed all through these things with no trouble. I had no trachoma. I was a healthy young man and, um, I think . . .

APPLEBOME: Do you remember any of the questions that they asked you or what the examination was like?

NELSON: The examination was very cursory. The doctor, you passed by and the doctor looks at your eyelids. And then you go to the next little section. They ask you your name. My original name was Katznelson.

APPLEBOME: Can you spell that?

NELSON: Yes. K-A-T-Z-N-E-L-S-O-N. The last part was Nelson. And I already decided before even they asked me my name, I decided that I will change my

name because Katznelson was too cumbersome a name. So when they asked me the name I told them Nelson.

APPLEBOME: What language were they speaking to you in?

NELSON: Uh, I don't remember. I didn't speak English at all. But they probably said, "name" and I told them "Nelson." And that's how it remained.

APPLEBOME: What was your first name?

NELSON: My name, first name wasn't changed. Samuel remained Samuel. I passed through with flying colors, so to speak. (he laughs) So I didn't spend much time at Ellis Island.

APPLEBOME: You didn't have a meal there?

NELSON: I don't think so, no. Because we came by boat in the morning, and the same afternoon I was out. And at that time, as I told you, there was a Jewish organization which was helping immigrants. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Of course, I was, I had the address of an uncle of mine, to whom I was supposed to really come.

APPLEBOME: How had you gotten his name?

NELSON: His name, oh, we had his name yet in Russia, you know.

APPLEBOME: Had he been writing home to the family?

NELSON: Yes, my mother corresponded, that's her brother. She corresponded with him. It was all arranged that I was going to come to him.

APPLEBOME: What had you heard about the United States before you came over?

NELSON: Eh, you see, I may have been different from the majority of other immigrants. Baku is a big city and I was quite literate. (he laughs) I read a lot. In Russian, of course. By the way, I speak Russian now fluently, read and write. And I had two trips to Russia in 1960 and 1982. Only about three years ago. Anyway, I read about America a lot. Mainly read stories and others, Fenimore Cooper stories, and so on. I read translations of Mark Twain way back when I was maybe twelve or fourteen years old. So it was interesting to me to know, but when I arrived in a way it was a disappointment. The Immigrant Society provided a little wagon to take me to my uncle's. And it travelled on the

Lower East Side, from South Ferry to East Broadway along the waterfront, which is a very poor neighborhood. Very slummy. And that did not make a good impression of America at that time. Because I really came from a bigger city which was much nicer, you know, architecturally. But finally I arrived to my uncle's, who was, he wasn't even home at that time. Heh. He was working.

APPLEBOME: This was what time of the day?

NELSON: In the early afternoon. His mother-in-law was in the house. And she greeted me, of course. We had to speak Yiddish because she didn't speak Russian and I didn't speak English. The intermediary language was Yiddish, which I knew, and I spoke to her. Uh, well, I spent a few days with the uncle and then I decided to move out into, he had no room really for me, so I, with his assistance, I rented a room on Henry Street in Manhattan on the Lower East Side. With the facilities in the yard. (he laughs) No baths, of course. (he laughs) And then started to look for work.

APPLEBOME: And so you had a room all to yourself?

NELSON: Yes.

APPLEBOME: Did it have a kitchen?

NELSON: No. I, uh, the landlady provided me with meals. Which were very reasonable in those days. (he laughs)

APPLEBOME: How much money had you come over with?

NELSON: I came over with about twenty-five dollars that was left over from my trip, so. It was enough to just, to pay for the rent and the first week and then I decided to go to work. Of course, having known the trade of making shoe uppers I was looking for work, uh, for work in a shoe factory. We looked with my uncle's help at ads in the paper because they did advertise for help usually for the factories at that time, and, uh, I found a job in a factory for very little pay. Ten dollars a week, I believe it was, which was a lot of money. (he laughs) And I started to work. I worked to higher grades in the factory a little bit and then a year passed and my mother and my future wife and my sister came over. By that time we already, my uncle and I, decided for us to find an apartment for them before they came.

So we moved to Harlem, to 100th Street and Madison Avenue. It was way uptown. You know the neighborhood. It's opposite the Mount Sinai Hospital. Of course, it's all thrown down, the buildings now. But anyway we hired an apartment and when my mother came they came right to that apartment. By the way, my mother did not come as an immigrant with the two girls. They travelled second class, as tourists. So they didn't have to steal the borders. They had passports. And they came in. They didn't have to go to Ellis Island either. We met them at the pier and got them right to the Harlem apartment. After working for a couple of years I decided to become an optometrist at somebody's advice. It was a young profession at that time. There wasn't any yet in Jersey or in many states, there were only a few states that had registered optometrists. Usually optometrists were not registered. Anybody who knew how could examine eyes to prescribe glasses. But then laws passed that they needed more education, more training, so I enrolled. Columbia University had this school of optometry. So I enrolled there. I did not graduate from Columbia but I had a tutor who gave me

intensive training so that I had, got my license in New Jersey which was a state that just got its optometry law that you had to be registered. In order to get it in time I took the tutor rather than stay at Columbia and finish. It would take longer. And, uh, after receiving my license I found, also through some ads, that some optometrist was trying to sell his practice in Paterson. He decided to go to Florida and buy an orange grove. (he laughs) He was an old Hollander. So we came together, I bought his practice and that's how it started.

APPLEBOME: Had you married your girlfriend at that point?

NELSON: Oh, yes, I forgot that, the most important part. As soon as my girlfriend came we got married. And she, she was milliner, she knew how to make hats. And hats were very popular at that time for women. So she got work and, in fact, after a while, she, before we moved to Paterson for my new office, she had her, she had her own millinery store in New York. But then we moved to Paterson and she gave up her practice. She gave up her work. And I started to work at my trade. And, uh, from this little thing grew a large family. I have three daughters,

five granddaughters, and thirteen great-grandchildren. (he laughs) All very devoted and very close to us. My wife died about five years ago. But we're very close with the family, especially with the young ones.

APPLEBOME: What did your mother and sister do when they came over to the country and joined you?

NELSON: As I told you, my sister also, she was a dressmaker. She found work. My mother, of course, kept house and took care of the children.

APPLEBOME: She moved to Paterson with you?

NELSON: Well, first we lived in New York with my mother for a long time. And when we moved to Paterson my mother stayed with my sister, who remained in New York, who was married at that time, and she stayed with my sister. So my wife and I moved by ourselves with our two children at that time. The third one was born in Paterson. The one I live with now is the youngest one who is still single and, uh, at least she works for the telephone company and we, she takes care of me, or vice versa. (he laughs) This is the story of my life. Any other thing that

you would like to know? (a telephone rings) Excuse me.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

APPLEBOME: Dr. Nelson, can we talk a little bit further about what your life was like in Russia?

NELSON: Uh . . . (he coughs)

APPLEBOME: What your housing was like?

NELSON: Uh, well, housing wasn't very good in Baku. Uh, not because, perhaps because we were, uh, not of the rich. (he laughs) And, uh, Baku being more or less an ancient city that became modern with the oil business, there weren't many, many living quarters suitable for proper living, so our, the living quarters were not of the best. But otherwise, having been always interested in reading and I became engaged in the political activities, uh, nothing else mattered to me at that time. So I really cannot say that I've having is, that I suffered in any way. My life was full of living.

APPLEBOME: What were the political activities you were involved

with that your mother was so worried about?

NELSON: Well, this was the movement, of the Social Democratic movement to overthrow the authority of the czars. That was the main political movement of that time. And that was a dangerous undertaking because the police were always at you and you happened to escape, really, most of the time. You, you work surreptitiously everything you do.

APPLEBOME: Were you ever arrested for political activities?

NELSON: Arrested at once, yes, and released, and so was my wife, too, she was engaged in the work, too. She was arrested once. I visited her in jail.
(he laughs)

APPLEBOME: What were either of you arrested for?

NELSON: Oh, for, uh, they found literature which was, uh, subversive, naturally. That's enough for an arrest. She was arrested because, uh, she and several other girl went on strike in the place they worked, in the millinery shop. Arrested for that, too. Strikes were also forbidden. So the life was hectic in that respect. In fact, there is one anecdote may be of

interest to you, I met Stalin once in Baku, personally. Would you like to hear that? (he laughs)

APPLEBOME: Certainly.

NELSON: There is an interesting anecdote about meeting Stalin. I didn't even tell it to my relatives for a long time. (he laughs) Lately I remembered it and I told them. One day I had to go and see him about delivering some message in the, in the work. He was an organizer of the Social, Social Democratic Party, in our region, Baku and the Caucausus in general. He wasn't even known by the name of Stalin. He was known by his own name and his nickname, in fact, because they tried to conceal their names for safety purposes. So . . .

APPLEBOME: Was Stalin his nickname or did he have a different nickname?

NELSON: No, Stalin was already his name he assumed later when he was in high echelons of the Party. His name was Soso. His name was, Joseph was his original name, Joseph (Jowasczewi?) and Joseph in Georgian, the young Georgian Josephs are called Soso, just

like a, uh, diminutive name, you know. So that's what he was known under, that (he coughs) pseudonym. Anyway, I, uh, I knew where he stayed in Baku, in a certain place. It was secret, but I knew about it because I had to deliver some message to him and, uh, I remember it was a summer morning about, really, about the early afternoon, yeah, no, it was really in the morning, and I came, (he coughs) they came out in the yard, it was in the summertime. We met outside his room where they stayed, and he started to ask me about my name, who I was, you know? I told him.m He said, "Are you Jewish?" I said, "Yes, I am Jewish." He said, "What do you do?" And It old him that I am, we have a little shop and we make shoe uppers, the upper part of shoes, you know. Uh, so, so here I must divert to tell you that in the that time and even to this day, most of the Jews in the ghetto, in most Russian ghettos were tailors. I don't know whether you know about it, but that's what started the need trade in New York, I guess, when they came here. Most of them, the majority were tailors. When I told him I was an upper maker he said, "How come you are not a tailor?" (he laughs) I'll never forget

that. He sort of, it impressed as a little bit of snide remark (he laughs) for some reason. There was no, it wasn't malicious, but somehow it didn't go right with me. (he laughs) "So how come you are not a tailor?" (he laughs) That's my experience with Stalin personally. Aside from his work, that has nothing to do with it. So, uh, the, my activities became really a little too hectic, and that's where Mother pleaded with me to, to leave, to go away.

APPLEBOME: Did you resist her at first?

NELSON: Yes, in the beginning I really didn't want to, because I was too much engaged in the work.

APPLEBOME: Uh-huh.

NELSON: But, uh, she gave me a lot of reasons. Our business wasn't turning too well and she thought I ought to look at something else and, of course, uh, the immigration to America was at its height in those years. If you want to improve your life, you go to America. (he laughs)

APPLEBOME: So you knew other people that were leaving for

America?

NELSON: Huh?

APPLEBOME: So you knew other people that were leaving for . . .

NELSON: No, from Baku I didn't know anybody who was leaving for America, really. By the way, there were very few Jews in Baku at that time. Families that you could count on on your fingers, practically. It was an Oriental city with not too many ethnic Russians, either. Mostly Azerbaijani, Georgians, Armenians. So I was really the only one (he laughs) that left from Baku to America, as far as I know. Of course, later on others left, too. I met them in New York later on. After being here a year or two you began to meet some more immigrants.

APPLEBOME: What was the response of your girlfriend and other friends when you told them you were leaving?

NELSON: Oh, there were tears, there were, it was the girl, the girl wasn't, uh, my girlfriend wasn't against it. The excitement of going to America was (he laughs) with all the young people, I believe. They wanted something new, something different. So

when they came we got married. I was twenty-one at that time, she was twenty.

APPLEBOME: You said that you traveled back to Russia in . . .

NELSON: In 1960. Way, long time after. I, I always kept, by the way, I never, I left Russia probably, physically, but my thoughts were always there. My political views haven't changed, which is probably unusual, I don't know, but they haven't. (he laughs) So in 1960, I always wanted to see the Soviet Union, see the changes, so I decided to take a trip with my wife. We took a three-week trip to the Soviet Union. We had a very good time. There are in, in New York there is a United States/Soviet Union friendship societies, you know. I got in touch with them and, with a few well-known people here who traveled to Soviet Union, like Kent, a writer and, uh, Rockwell Kent, I don't know whether you are familiar with him. Yeah. And he, he encouraged me to go. (he laughs) In fact, he gave me so many people to, people he knew in Soviet Union, to see when I came there, so I did and my reception was very nice. Uh, I travelled not only to Moscow, but I went to Baku, to my , but I always

wanted to go to Mogilev, where I was born. But, regretfully, Mogilev is out of bounds for foreigners. They have military installations, and you can't go there. So I was content to go to Baku and Kiev, Moscow, Leningrad.

APPLEBOME: You said that when you got off at Ellis Island that Hebrew Immigration Aid Organization . . .

NELSON: Yes, they were very active in helping immigrants to, to get settled, you know, help them physically really to, they had the transportation, as I said, the little (he laughs) wagon, with a horse wagon, of course, and they would, you'd give them the address and they would take you there. To . . .

APPLEBOME: How did you know that that service was available?

NELSON: I suppose, rumors, you hear that.

APPLEBOME: Uh-huh.

NELSON: Uh, as I said, my uncle didn't come to get me because he was, uh, where he was working, in a factory, and because he couldn't take the day off. So, there was no trouble. They, they were very accommodating that way.

APPLEBOME: What were the other services they provided?

NELSON: I really don't know, but I believe they would even help immigrants find jobs, working. Helping them to get lodgings, so on, if necessary. I had a lodging, of course, my uncle, but otherwise I was, others probably if I didn't have anyone they would help in that way. I believe they, uh, there is something they are helping now, too, or, you don't, that Society does not exist? Or do you know whether it does?

APPLEBOME: I don't know.

NELSON: It was known by its acronym, HIAS, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. So that was their help and it was appreciated at that time. And, uh, the rest is history. (he laughs)

APPLEBOME: Were there many immigrants in your neighborhood?

NELSON: What do you mean, my neighborhood?

APPLEBOME: When you arrived in New York . . .

NELSON: Uh-huh.

APPLEBOME: What was the neighborhood like?

NELSON: Yeah, well, the neighborhoods, the East Side, those days, very, was a hectic and busy, part of the city. I remember it distinctly, that it seemed to me, or whatever, that the streets were always full of people and I believe they were. The Lower East Side was crowded with immigrants, I believe. They were already here, they weren't immigrants any more, they were (he laughs) already settled, but, uh, there were a lot of them. The East Side is empty nowadays compared to my days. East Broadway was, uh, a very busy thoroughfare, like Broadway (he laughs), with Yiddish newspapers, theaters, the Educational Alliance, which is an institution that was also helping immigrants in learning the language, and so on. I learned all my English by myself from reading and listening to radio. Not television. (he laughs) And I had no trouble in learning.

APPLEBOME: Did you continue to be politically active?

NELSON: Yes. If not actively, at least interested in any other way possible, to this day. And in, uh, in 1982 I had an opportunity. My grandson of mine, my

granddaughter's husband, rather, was coming on a trip to Soviet Union with a group of the World Trade Center and he asked me whether I would like to go. And I accepted. Well, that was very interesting trip, too. It was a big group of about eighty people from the World Trade Center, different businessmen were going to Soviet Union to see whether they can have business contacts and so on.

APPLEBOME: And you were ninety-six or ninety-seven at the time?

NELSON: Ninety-, I was ninety-six, yeah. And I went there (he laughs) and I really acted as interpreter for the group, because I speak fluently yet. Very few Jews do that, by the way, of the, of the majority of Jewish population of Soviet Union. Lately, of course, they have assimilated and they are free to go to wherever they city they want to, but in my, early days, Jews were confined to the ghettos, you know, to the Pale, rather, certain regions. And while they spoke a little Russian, they didn't speak well enough at all. But me living in Baku and, uh, being an avid reader, I really learned my Russian very well. I speak as well as any Russian does, and when I went with the group now I had to act as

interpreter in many cases. And I was their, I was their official grandfather. (he laughs) So we spent only ten days this time.

APPLEBOME: Well, do you feel you did the right thing in coming over, in immigrating to the United States?

NELSON: I think I did. As far as, uh, well, my well-being is concerned. There's, uh, there's still a little guilt feeling for leaving the others to fight on, you know, for the Revolution. But, uh, we have to live with that, yeah. But the fact is, the fact that I didn't forsake my ideals is sort of extenuating circumstances (he laughs). And here, of course, life is, here it is, I am always interested in things. That keeps me going. I paint a little, I write some poetry occasionally. And I'm interested in humans, in world affairs. That never left me.

APPLEBOME: Uh-huh.

NELSON: And probably that's one of the reasons of my, still going at this age. What interests me not only, uh, Jews or Gentiles or Armenians or Greeks. Everybody is of interest to me, as human beings. What else

can I tell you?

APPLEBOME: Um, I think that's enough. That was very interesting.

NELSON: I believe so. As of a different, you probably have, what were your other interviews yet? Can compare?

APPLEBOME: Well, we're just starting the project now, so . . .

NELSON: Uh-huh.

APPLEBOME: I can't do too much comparing yet.

NELSON: Yeah.

APPLEBOME: This concludes the interview with Dr. Sam Nelson. It's now 3:25.