

KECK-20

ALEXANDER H. BROWN

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INTERVIEW DATE: AUGUST 19, 1985

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INTERVIEWER: NANCY DALLETT

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ROUMANIA (BORN ARGENTINA), 1922

AGE 10

PASSAGE ON THE "MAURETANIA"

DALLETT: This is Nancy Dallett and I'm speaking with Alexander Brown on Monday, August 19, 1985. We are beginning this interview at 11:20 AM, and we are about to interview Mr. Brown about his immigration experience from Roumania in 1922. Um, can you tell me where and when you were born?

BROWN: I was born on Buenos Aires, Argentina on August 5, 1912. And after a few years there, approximately two years, my parents, who were importuned to coming to Buenos Aires from Russia because my mother had a sister there and the two of them were close, uh, my parents decided to go to Argentina. They were there for a number of years and somehow or other life was

not particularly what they wanted and they made the decision that they were going to go back to Russia. Ah, my father, while he was in Buenos Aires, was a peddler, which is what most of the people in those days coming to Argentina resorted to. Ah, so that, that was not much in keeping with what he wanted, and being a very aggressive individual, he chose to go back to Russia. Consequently, since life was not what my father wanted to fabricate for himself, he took his family, which at that time, was made up of my older sister, who was two years older than I, and we went back to Russia. Ah, my father, again, mentioning, since he was a very aggressive individual, decided to go into the tobacco growing business. And he in a very short time was able to amass a considerable amount of, of tobacco growing. And my recollection of the way of life that we had was extremely comfortable because my father had become quite a wealthy man at a very, very early age. Ah, life in Roumania, and we were located in Bessarabia, which is adjacent to the Russia border.

DALLETT: Can you spell that for us?

BROWN: B-E-S-S-A-R-I-B-I-A [sic]. It would be comparable to

our country, that's the name of the, it was part of Roumania, controlled by the national government, and it had its own independent form of government. Ah, I remember going to school in the, in Roumania. And I remember very vividly that the demands that were made of us, while going to school, considerably much more difficult than they were in the States. By the time I was ready to leave Rumania I had, was speaking four languages. And I was speaking moderate French. I was speaking Roumanian. I was speaking Hebrew, and some Russian. The life was extremely acceptable there and, of course, until the first World War started, and that was, to go back, we go to the period of 1917 and '18.

At that time the Russians came into Roumania, and that being the overthrow of the government in Russia and the and the communist powers came into being. Ah, almost overnight everything that we had was confiscated by the Russians. From total wealth we went into almost total poverty. My recollection of the war, are rather, my recollections are vivid, because the, I remember quite clearly how we were escaping the bullets by lying on the floor and having the pillows covering the windows to deflect the bullets. I remember also my father being taken into

the service. I remember the Bolsheviks coming to the door, it was not a matter of choosing whether he wanted to or not. And simply grabbed a (?) hat that he was wearing. That stands out in my mind. And they simply manhandled him and took him over to the center where he was taken into the service. It was a vivid recollection because it was a, a possibly bordering on panic for a small child seeing his father being manhandled and taken away from him. I remember also that there were tribunals being set up in which people were being tried. I have almost a picture of the activities that were taking place which were across the street from where we were living. And at that time, although my father had been dispossessed of almost all that he had owned, we still were able to remain in the house that we lived in, which was an extremely comfortable house. And we had one or two maids still with us. So even though he was stripped of many of his possessions, apparently we were still able to live a life that was extremely comfortable. And it was from this home that I was able to look across and see these trials that were going on. At that age, of course, they were not significant as they would be to someone who was older, but I do recall

that the tribunals and the hearings were, they were rapid. They, it was not a matter of any prolonged testimony being in behalf of against an individual. It was almost remindful of the French Revolution when people were simply taken before a tribunal and they were declared innocent or guilty, and what happened to these people once they were declared guilty was something that was only conjectured. But undoubtedly they were killed. Because there was no mercy on the part of the, the Bolsheviks, vis a vis the people of Bessarabia, or for that matter, any other area that they went into, that they took over. Ah, the school was not interrupted during this entire time. WE were, I was still able to go to school. I remember that, school was, essentially was a very demanding experience, but at the same time, not knowing any different, any better, we certainly assumed that that was the way of life. It was only later on that I realized in comparison with what took place in the United States, that the degree of education that we had there was considerably more severe and considerably more demanding in terms of the output that was expected of the individual. But apparently life with the Bolsheviks was not a comfortable one.

Because it was in 1919 or 1920 that my mother's family, which was by that time in the United States, began to move in the direction of trying to get us to come over to the United States. I do not recall that there was any resistance because by that time much of what we had we were already stripped of, that my father was willing to make the move.

DALLETT: Had he been called in front of the tribunal?

BROWN: My father was not. What, in answer to your question is that my father was, when he was in the army, obviously had developed very severe bronchial condition. And even though that was not in keeping with what the Russians would do with an individual, he was able to be released from the army. Obviously his physical condition was such that they didn't keep him.

DALLETT: Did he continue to run his tobacco business then?

BROWN: The, no, he was entirely stripped, as I said of his possessions. And I think that to the best of my recollection, that he simply was working for someone else in that same, in a tobacco business. But under the Russian regime you just didn't own anything because they simply confiscated everything. The

arrangements for coming over to this country were made by my mother's brothers, primarily one, who was the oldest of the brothers, who had obviously an intense loyalty and attachment to the family. And it was he who was essentially responsible for bringing us over to this country. I recall that when we were ready to leave that even though I was only about ten years old, I became the spokesman for the family because I was able to communicate in three languages, although my father was able to speak roughly five languages that I can recall. I remember we travelled across from Roumania by train to Cherbourg, France where we were scheduled to leave on the Mauretania, which was the largest sailing ship at that time. I will go back to our experience on the, on the ship, in a moment. I want to bring this in sort of as an anecdote that once we left Roumania my mother still had family there. There were, it was a stepsister, two stepsisters, rather, and I remember that while there I, during the war, I recall that I was sleeping there and I didn't quite know what was happening, but there seemed to be a considerable amount of activity going on. And it wasn't until later on that I was aware of the fact that what happened. And it was my aunt, that they

were in a rather crude way, were manufacturing liquor on the premises. And they obviously were selling it.

And my guess is that probably that was one of the ways of getting into the good graces of the powers that be.

Ah, another anecdote refers to the Jewish holiday of Passover. And, interestingly enough that I can recall, how important an occasion it was, that as a child we were dressed always in new clothes. And I recall sitting on our porch and watching young people promenading up and down the street and there was a very impressive sort of thing that all these years I can have a mental picture of these young people, arm in arm, walking down the street in their so-called finest clothes. Because Passover was such a happy time for the Jewish people in Roumania. There obviously was not too severe an interference at that, during those years on the part of the Bolsheviks. Because if life was not as easy and as plush as it was during, prior to their coming in, after they took over, apparently we were able to maintain a modicum of what we had from before and life was not as strenuous as it was to some people. But apparently it was obvious to my father that he certainly was not going to make too much progress. And he would not be able

to be, he was going to have to be under the control of a, of an outside power. And that, I am quite sure, knowing him as an individual, that that was not in keeping with what he would have wanted. And I am sure that that had to be a compelling reason for his wanting, for his consenting to leave for the States. But going back to the time when we were leaving Roumania and all the arrangements were being made. And I was mentioning before about an anecdote and I somehow or other came back to two others that I recalled when I was there. But the one I want to speak of is the train ride that we had from Roumania to, to Cherbourg, France. And I recall that during that time interval, which must have been perhaps close to a week, we were riding on the train and that the only thing that we had to eat were cans of sardines that obviously my parents were able to gather up for the journey to sustain us. And I, I remember that I had developed such an immense distaste for sardines because I had eaten them for so many days, that to this day I have never tasted another sardine. It's interesting that I can recall that since when any, since I find myself now, that when anyone talks, mentions sardines, that it almost makes me revolt at

the very thought of eating it. When we got to Cherbourg, France we were put into a, an encampment for people that were going to go abroad.

DALLETT: Now you already had whatever papers were necessary at this point. Your father had arranged that?

BROWN: At that time, when we were scheduled to come to America, everything was in order in terms of the, the needed papers to permit us to come to the United States. But I want to go back to Cherbourg, France. I remember while we were waiting to leave Cherbourg to go to America, on one particular day, I sort of broke away from my family and I would imagine that it was the smart aleck that was in me that since I was able to speak some French, that I assured my family that I can make my way around, and I will be able to get back. It seemed that I must have been gone for hours, and my parents began to panic because they didn't quite know how to go about trying to find me. And since I was only about ten years old, they, they were frightened that something may have happened to me. But I recall that I was able to make my way around and the reason for my staying away that I found it very interesting that I was able to roam around without

anyone bothering me. And then later on in the evening I decided, well, it was time for me to go back and I came back and I recall that there was, there was a duality, one of anger and one of joy, that I, number one, that I had dared do what I did, and joy coming from the fact that I did come back. Once we boarded the Mauretania and we were ready to leave, because it was, because it was the largest boat at that time on the waters, that the, when we left Cherbourg the, we were in fairly shallow water. And the boat was that huge that the, not having contemporary facilities, ah, to make a trip comfortable, that I can pictorially see in front of me, people just laying on the deck all over the boat just vomiting all over because they were so sick. And there wasn't, until we, the following day, that the people were able to become a little more comfortable, after being, after going into deep water. But again, I remember that I was spared that and I did not get sick. And I recall my going around and in my own way trying to help people that were just laying there prostrate. Because when you are having it can be a very uncomfortable condition.

DALLETT: What had they told you about where you were, you were

coming to the United States? Did you have any conception of what they was going to mean, or did you have any expectations at that point while you were on the boat?

BROWN: I believe that what I can say in retrospect is that as a young person I personally did not look upon the journey or the change with any disfavor. Even though I was separated from friends and from a way of life that looked very comfortable. Because we were going to a land that was look upon as milk and honey. This is what everyone wanted to do. They wanted to come to the States. So that . . .

DALLETT: Did you get letters from your grandparents that might have explained what life, where did they live in this country? You were coming to your grandparents, right?

BROWN: Let me, let me try to continue and then I will go back to that. The, because of being young and having said a moment ago that, even though I was separated from a comfortable way of life and obviously a satisfactory way of life, I did not seem to have any reservations about making a change. I would certainly conjecture that my parents would have experienced the sense of

separation much more than I did because my father left his entire family of two brothers and a mother and father living in Roumania. And I'm sure that it had to be difficult for him. On the other hand, my mother was going to her family, from whom she had been separated as a young child. And I would anticipate that she was looking forward to it more than, than my father. In terms of what to expect, always you've got to keep in mind that we were going to a place where that had been romanticized. That, that was the place where people should be going to, to the United States.

And I am quite sure that, it was beyond their conception of what to expect or what to anticipate, which I will speak about later. Of course, life coming here was not very simple once we were here. Ah, having, going back to our, to the, Mauretania. To this day I still recall which, even in terms of the 1980's, that we made the boat trip from Cherbourg, France to Ellis Island and to the United States in four-and-a-half days. Which was almost unbelievable when you're talking in terms of 1922. Because in 1985 that would be considered quite an accomplishment. So that the, there were no discomforts on the trip over except for the immediate one after leaving the

Cherbourg, France. And then, of course, we found ourselves coming to the United States and coming into Ellis Island.

DALLETT: Before we come into Ellis Island, do you remember, you were packed up to come to America. Do you remember bringing something special of your own from your home country, or . . .

BROWN: That's a very good question because there were, there were certainly only limited thing that we could bring because whatever furnishing we had, and obviously they must have been considerable, were disposed of. And the, what I recall that what was brought over was a considerable amount of jewelry that my mother had, that was extremely valuable. It was solid gold. And particularly do I remember the chains and the, there were long st5rands. They were obviously extremely expensive, although I, I can remember that what happened that she had to, rather my parents had to dispose of them once we came to the States because we needed the money.

DALLETT: This is the end of side one of interview 020.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

DALLETT: This is the beginning of side two of interview 020. You were talking about what you had brought over from Roumania.

DALLETT: The jewelry, being something that, was manageable in terms of not being too cumbersome, must have been quite sizeable because I know when they were sold in the States they brought in a decent amount of, money. And it was, of course, , a very regrettable thing to do, because later on I recall my parents having spoken of what they had to divest themselves of in order to make ends meet. And there was some possessions that they would have cherished keeping and passing along to the children. But it became a matter of necessity. Ah, to the degree that things were portable, there was some silverware that was also brought along, and I recall that the silverware was very heavy as compared with what we used over here. Particularly the tablespoons were almost one-and-a-half or twice the size that we use now. And they were considerably, as I said before, heavy and obviously that was the type of silverware that was being mae at that time. And I am sure that if we had it now it would be a prize

possession. But that, too, had to go the way of all flesh because it was necessary for, it was necessary for maintenance.

DALLETT: Were most of the other people who were on the Mauretania at that time in a similar position to you? Were they also coming to this country, moving to this country, or were you not aware of that?

BROWN: To the best of my recollection, it was not a, it was not made up of individuals who were migrating from one country to another. Because of the size of the, of the ship, perhaps it's a much better word to use than boat, because this was an immense ship, that there were other passengers on there, but again, I mention that because the nature of the human being that I was, I mingled with a lot of people and there were, I would say, a larger proportion of people that were coming here as visitors rather than those people who were migrating from the European continent. Although it was a sizeable amount that were migrating. Once we came into the, into Ellis Island it was a totally different experience. Perhaps I can compare that with, to some degree, with the, the discomfort that we were exposed to when the Bolsheviks came into

Roumania. There was fright. There was uncertainty. Because even though I had witnessed the tyranny of the Russian regime of the Bolsheviks, and, somehow or other you separate that from anything that we were coming to because essentially we were coming to a country that was totally free of any of the aspects of a totalitarian regime. Here we were supposed to be handled with dignity and with respect and with kindness. But once we got to Ellis Island we experienced a situation that was not one that you remember with any pleasantness. We were being marshalled through the gates there as if we were in, we were going into prison. The people who were in the role of authority were not particularly gentle. They were not especially kind. And they were not, I would also say, considerate of the fact that here were people coming to a totally strange land, who couldn't speak the language. And I might add, also, that those who were in the role of authority at Ellis Island were not able to speak the language that we knew and understandably so, because, after all, we were coming from Europe and you had multiple languages. And the people that were coming were not just coming from Roumania, they were coming from all over the European

continent. So that the . . .

DALLETT: But my understanding that was that the guards spoke, they employed people who spoke as many as 18 languages and you're saying . . .

BROWN: Some of the people did, but there were too many there that did not. Because especially do I remember that there was a deficiency in the communication between those of us who were coming here and those who were there. There was no doubt that, there were some people there who were able to speak multiple languages. But, as I recall, it was difficult to convey very often to people there what we wanted and what we needed. Because we were not treated with any kind of gentleness. I remember specifically because I was there for a period, we were maintained there for two weeks. Because by that time, and I hadn't mentioned this before, there were three children. I'm sorry. There were four. My younger brother was just born and he was only about six months to a year old. And my third sibling, my sister, had the rather unfortunate experience. Prior to our coming to the United States, and certainly we, no one has been able to diagnose it or has been able to tell what happened,

is that she began losing her hair. And what happened was that you could almost put your hand on her hair and pull out just a batch of hair. And by the time we had gotten to Ellis Island she was as bald as a cue ball. Now, understandably, that would have raised a question immediately. What is the problem? They did not know what the problem was. And, as I recall, there was no special desire to see this country flooded with immigrants. You gotta remember that we are talking now, just about the time when the industrial revolution hit the United States. By that time the industrial revolution had been in the process of about ten years. So that the labor market was not that fluid. And surely they didn't want any cheap competition coming in. And immigrants were frowned upon and obviously it was conveyed at Ellis Island also and it must have filtered down to the people who were in authority there. Because the impression that remains with me is that it was not a very comfortable situation. My sister was taken and put, of course, into the infirmary. They were going to try to establish on whether or not we were going to be allowed to come into the States. As a matter of fact, on the slightest type of problem that they would

discover whereby they could establish a position of not wanting you to come in, they had no great reservations about sending you back. That was a, an immediate fear. In addition to that, my older sister had obviously, had some, what was called at that time, a slight heart murmur. So that both of them were put into the infirmary.

DALLETT: Do you remember how they went through the examinations? Did you as a family go through together?

BROWN: The, we were examined individually. And what, m what also is to this day not understandable is that once they were put into the infirmary my parents were not allowed to see them. And it became a frightening experience because we didn't know what was happening. And, as I said before, we were there for two weeks. And fourteen days can be an eternity. It wasn't to me personally that because, again, being the sort of an individual that I was, I, myself, was able to move around Ellis Island. I was able to talk to people. I had freedom of movement. I was not exposed to any, any of the abuse, and there was a considerable amount of abuse. You've got to keep in mind that this was a,

there was a complexity, an inborn complexity, shall I say, insofar as you had people from all over, different personalities, different backgrounds, some were not particularly desirable individuals. There was no distinction. We were all put together. We were all herded together in the dining room. And the best that I can describe is that we were sitting at tables similar to what you have in the prisons now. These long tables with long benches. And, of course, , there was, you were simply given whatever was rationed out to you that day. I don't recall that we were starving, but surely we were, we can't talk about it as being the most desirable quality of food. All in all, if you were to summarize it and if you were to make any kind of a generalization about the experience at Ellis Island, at best you could say that it was an unpleasant experience. And I go back to the reasons for it. And I think it is probably due to the fact that we were not especially desirable people. We were not especially wanted here. What probably caused, and let me pause for a moment and let me go back to the hospital situation. And i had said that the two of my sisters were there. Perhaps a commentary on this might be that one was there with a heart murmur. The

other was there because she had lost her hair. But my younger, younger sister, the one who had lost her hair, was probably similar to my own personality, in that she was a fighter also. And the doctors would make daily visits to the infirmary. And the doctor came over to my older sister and started looking at her head of hair. She was the one that had murmur. And she was trying to convey to him that there was nothing wrong with her hair. He could not speak the language, she in turn could not speak the language either. And he kept on looking at her hair instead of checking her for her heart murmur, and she was not able to tell him that it was the sister, the one that was having the problem. Because she was not around, she was floating around somewhere in the infirmary. But there too, the examination, the medical examination, was not with any particular desire to find out what was really wrong. I think it would have taken nothing important, as I said before, to tell us that we would have to go back. Because no one was able to tell at that time what my sister's hair falling out, whether it was due to communicable disease, or whether it was due to nerves, or whatever. And as I said, to this day we did not have. It was fortunate

for us, and I think that probably we might have been shipped back if it weren't for the fact that my father had a cousin who was a doctor in New York. And apparently he was involved considerably in whatever influence he was able to use with the medical profession, to get us off the boat. I have, again, I have that feeling that perhaps if we had not had the intervention of my father's cousin, the immense amount of persistent pressure that my mother's brother used in connection with, as I recall, having been told, that one of my uncles was a veteran of the First World War. Interesting enough, this has just come to me, and I've never thought about that, that he was a veteran of the First World War and he had made contacts with the authorities here. And his part in it was obviously also important in bringing pressure on the authorities to allow us to come in. And it was perhaps a combined effort, both on the part of my father's cousin, the doctor and my uncle, who was my mother's d, and his having been in the army and his being able to muster the political influence of the American government that we were able to come into this country. Once we, were there any questions that you wanted to ask me pertaining to Ellis Island?

DALLETT: Um, just if you could elaborate a little bit on how, I'm trying to picture, how old were you then?

BROWN: Ten years old.

DALLETT: You're ten years old. You're detained there for two weeks. You have free run of the place.

DALLETT: I personally, as I recall, I had free run of the place. I did not, I was not exposed to any kind, and the word I used before was abuse. However, I did see abuse on the ship. I remember that there was certainly much to be desired in terms of the indelicacy with which the foreigners were treated.

DALLETT: So you did get to see other ships unload and other groups of people come through?

BROWN: No, I, uh, once you went through the point of embarkation where you, once you got into Ellis Island, where you were confined, and there you stayed was totally apart from the place where you had embarked. So that, the only way we knew that other people were coming in was that we would meet them. I would know that these were strangers coming in that I hadn't seen. But actually, once we had gone through, and we

had been processed, that's probably the word that I want to use, we were not permitted, to the best of my recollection, to go back to see what was happening with other people. But I am quite sure that the treatment we got was no better and no worse than what was happening to other people. I, I know that my parents felt that way and I now that it was conveyed to us, that there would have been no hesitation at all to send us back where we came from, if there had not been any recession on the part of other people. So you got the feeling that we were certainly not wanted and I would be inclined to believe that many people who came here after going through that rigorous trip over to the States were probably returned back to where they came from or wherever they wanted to go. You could have chosen, once you were returned you could have chosen any other place that you wanted to go. And you did not have to go unnecessarily to the place where you came from. Uh . . .

DALLETT: Let me ask you this, before you went through that, your stay on Ellis Island, as the boat came into the Harbor, you saw the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island?

BROWN: Yes, I seem to believe that that was almost inescapable. The size of it. The fact that we were approaching this new land. There was an immense amount of excitement. Because, as I previously said, we were looking forward to coming to this so-called land of honey. This was the place to come to. And the excitement of seeing the Statue of Liberty was undoubtedly an exciting moment, for all of us. Because, in spite of all the reservations that older people would have about making a change, I would say that it, there was duality. Certainly looking forward to something considerably more comfortable, because, after all, what you left behind was something that you wanted to forget. You wanted to, you were escaping from. And surely you were looking forward to something much better. And there's no doubt that all the people that were coming here, even though they were not all necessarily coming from Roumania, for one reason or another, were making the change because they were looking for something better than what they had. So that there was that sense of excitement, surely. There was that anticipation at seeing the Statue of Liberty, there's no doubt about it. And I think that my recollections are still there at seeing this

immense symbol of what represented the United States.

Even though I was only ten years old, I am sure I knew what the Statue of Liberty symbolized.

DALLETT: But then within a few hours, was it within a few hours that you came in Ellis Island . . .

BROWN: And then, and then once we came into Ellis Island there's no question about it, that the, uh, the treatment, the confinement, the fact that we were detained two weeks, had a great deal to do with making you wonder was this the thing to do. And again I must speak in terms of my parents. Because they were the ones that would have had the serious doubts. They were the ones that would have had the real questions, was the move the intelligent thing to do. I think we, as young, as youngsters, I am sure did not undergo the, uh, the anxieties, perhaps that, that my parents had gone through. I'm sure there were a great deal of anxieties. No doubt about it. And I'm sure that the two-week confinement there was a, had to remain a continuing very unpleasant experience. And certainly as an introduction to the United States, it was not, what one would be looking for, forward to. And once having come here, do you have any other questions?

BROWN: Just one other thing, ah, were your grandparents, did your grandparents come to the Island to pick you up or were you in touch with them as soon as you landed? Did they know you had been detained for the two weeks?

BROWN: They were not, correction. If I had given you the impression about grandparents, ah, there were no grandparents. Ah, I had referred to my father's cousin who was a doctor, and I had referred to my mother's two brothers who were there. My parents, my father's parents, who were my grandparents, remained in Russia and Roumania. My mother's mother and father, who were in the States, were already dead when we got here. So that I never saw my grandparents on my mother's side.

DALLETT: So it was uncles who were here then.

BROWN: That is correct. They were the ones who were, as I said, instrumental in bringing us to this country. Once we arrived here, when we, I said, retraction. Once we got out of Ellis Island, ah, I'm sure, again, as a youngster I was able to put it behind me. I didn't allow that to become all pervasive in my, in my life, but I am sure that it was a tormenting

experience for my parents and it remained such for quite a while. As a matter of fact I keep thinking in terms of my mother and what she had experienced through her life. She was ridden with anxieties and I keep wondering what part that experience in Ellis Island, what part they may have, what reaction that may have been in, her continuing illness with depression and anxiety. Once we got to New York, of course, life was different. We were greeted warmly. We were, we were allowed, we stayed in New York for a couple of days. No more than that because my father's brother was there and they hadn't seen each other for so long that there was an, an immensely exciting reunion between them. And to this day I still recall that my uncle Max who was the one most instrumental in bringing us to this country, that he was driving a Stuts. And it's interesting that I am talking about something that happened more than sixty years ago. That I visualize the car that we drove from New York back to Chester, Pennsylvania. The length of the ride and I'm sure that that was the first time that I had ever been in an automobile. Because the means of locomotion in the old country was certainly not the automobile. It was the horse and buggy. And once we

got to the United States and once we got to Chester where we were permanently settled, I don't know how much detail you want. Once we got settled, the quarters were not anywhere near the quality of comfort that we had in Roumania. As I had said before we lived very comfortably. Interestingly enough, I keep remembering the part of the comfort that we had, that we lived in, and yet that interval of time between 1920 and 1922 when my father had been divested of all his possessions, what life was like then seems to have escaped me entirely. I just do not recall that we were, whether we were impoverished, whether our style of life had changed, I don't recall. But inasmuch as I do recall very vividly the comfort that we had in Roumania, then coming here to the States and what we lived, moved into, there was an immense disparity in what were there. And that one, and that remains very clearly in my mind. And the quarters here were very confining. We were put into a small, what I would call a two-story little house in back of my uncle's place of business. And we, we were not a charity case insofar as my family was here, my mother's family, rather, was here. But on the other hand we were not among the affluent, either.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

DALLETT: This is Nancy Dallett. I'm interviewing Mr. Alexander Brown, who came from Roumania in 1922, and this is the beginning of cassette number two of the interview number 020.

BROWN: So that the living accommodations were diametrically the opposite of what we had when we were in Roumania. But again, being young, you're flexible and you make the accommodation. I'm sure essentially within, my parents' thoughts were, was what do we do in order to make a living. And the, for want of a better word, i would say the, the practical and the thing to have done, which he did, was to become, in those terms we used the word peddler. And a peddler was a very commonplace occupation with those who came to this country and had no professions. And most of the people who came over here were certainly unskilled and certainly we came here to Chest where he was not going to go into the tobacco business, this as not a farming area. We were located over here in Chester because my mother's family was here and this is where we were

going to stay. And even though my father, who I referred to as a very aggressive individual, I don't think that he was contemplating making any move from Chester into an agrarian area to raise tobacco. But being as adaptable as he was, he became a peddler. And it's rather interesting. Because he was able to speak Spanish, having been in Buenos Aires, he was able also to doctor his Spanish in such a way that he was able to speak Italian. And, and what happened was that he, in a relatively short time, became fairly successful. In quotes "successful. After all, we had nothing. But what happened is that being a hard-working individual, and how you started out then was with a horse and buggy. And you would peddle the things. And essentially what happened was that he would, he was able to sense in, perhaps, a relatively short period of time, that he could exploit his, his Spanish and his Italian so that he was referred to by all the Italian people that he peddled to. In those days, the stores were not what you see today. They were not nearly as plentiful and the modus operandi was for people to buy from the peddlers who used to come knock from door to door. And my father became known as "the espanol." This was the Spanish guy. It

wasn't that he was Jewish, but rather that he was espanol. And because he was able to establish a line of communication with them, there was a comraderie sort of established and he managed to do quite well. And I recall also that when going out with my father on the horse and buggy, especially on weekends, I remember I would go with him, and I would help him with the, in his, in his selling of the, and it was essentially in the clothing end of it that we were in.

And if, one might ask, well, why didn't he go into pots and pans, why clothing? Well, it was understandable in view of the fact that my mother's family, all of them, were in business, and all of them were in the, in the, in department store business. So that he, we gravitated to that, which was understandable. And it was after a number of years, being with a horse and buggy. And I recall, as a matter of fact, coming in at the end of a day and my father would be coming home from work and I would go down to the stable with him and, of course, , take the horse and put him in the stable and feed him. And I remember even the location of the area. We lived on Morton Avenue and it was about three blocks down. When I think in terms of what it is today and what it

was then, these were all tables there. And the horses were there and that's where they were kept. And, the life in general was not unpleasant for me individually. Because I was able to accommodate. The most difficult part for me was that I had been, when I got here I was ten years old. I had already, was able to speak three or four languages. I was what I would, what I would modestly say I was certainly bright, and suddenly I found myself in first grade. And that was an unforgettable experience for me. Because I was put in with six-year-olds and we were living in that neighborhood at that time on Morton Avenue where essentially it was inhabited by the Russian and Polish and Irish people. And I was going to the grade school on Morton Avenue, the Morton Avenue School, and I was put in first grade. And because of, I was small in stature, I became, and couldn't speak the English language, that was probably the most devastating time of my life. Not being able to communicate and trying to find a place for yourself to hide so that you wouldn't be ridiculed. And you wouldn't be, I remember the expression that they used. "You're a Jew baby." Because being Jewish, at that time, was something that was ridiculed. It was, rather, let me

rephrase it by saying we had not become democratic enough in 1922. And certainly the offspring of these Russian and Polish and Irish people, who should have had an appreciation for those who were migrating to this country, because they also undoubtedly had come to this country. Their offspring were not taught to be tolerant of those that were there. So I repeat. That experience was a devastating experience. Trying to escape the, the rigors of being a so-called ostracized minority among minorities. But I was able to learn enough of the language fairly, fairly rapid that I was constantly being skipped from grade to grade until in finally caught up with the people on my own age level. And then it became, well, school became more tolerable. But I found myself that I had gravitated, I had gravitated to my own kind. To the Jewish youngsters that I met in the Hebrew school. And there again I was so much better prepared than they were that they, they were no competition to me and therefore Hebrew school didn't make any demands on me. And so that my parents were aware of that and they said, well, they got me a private tutor to teach me. Knowing that I had the ability and I wasn't, I wasn't using it. I suppose we, well, call it

instinctively, or whatever, the emphasis in education was something that was always very pervasive in our family. I know that especially was it so with my mother, who just placed a tremendous premium on that.

But I, I want to go back. When I said before that I gravitated to the Jewish youngsters through the Hebrew school, which is understandable enough. You're going to gravitate to those people who do not make life miserable for you. And because of my experiences that I had in the grades, it was something that was unforgettable. And I, and I recall to this day the very unpleasant experiences. There, so many times I was beaten up by these kids who were bigger than I was. I just became a perfect target for them. And that was terrible punishment. And I, as I said before, here it is 60 years and I still look back upon it with a certain amount of total, total bitterness that my early years were spent that way. And they may have left an imprint on me, I don't know. Maybe my, being pro-Jewish, as I am, may stem back to the fact that here I was given such a terribly hard time by these people, these, those who were not Jewish. Even though I think of myself as being a rather liberal individual, and I certainly do not frown upon other

cultures, I think that there was a certain cementing with, at that time, of my total allegiance to my being Jewish because they were the ones who made life most comfortable for me. Where do you want me to go?

DALLETT: Um, let's see. Tell me more about once you finished school, your English is, uh . . .

BROWN: Well, my English actually started improving when I got to the sixth grade. I would say that to get to the sixth grade, well, I graduated in 1927, public school. So it took me five years. Four-and-a-half, took me about, to go through the eight grades. And school, once I got into fifth or sixth grade school became a snap to me. And I was, I think once I got my footing and I was able to speak the English language that part of me which was so paramount when I was younger, when I was a very, when I was gregarious and when I liked to mingle with people, I found it coming into being again with me as I was able to get a hold of the English language. And I became very active in almost every activity in the school. Especially in my high school days I remember that one other person who was Sam Warwick and I, were either, one of the two of us was President of every organization that was in the

school. At one time, from, during the entire time we were in high school. So that obviously I was able to overcome much of that which was taken out of me during the early years and . . . (voice off mike)

DALLETT: Once you were settled here did anyone else from your father's family come to this country from Roumania?

BROWN: No. As a matter of fact, my father's family, all of them, were extinguished during the Holocaust. He had two brothers, and their families were totally annihilated. And there was no, there was no remnants and no remains at all of his family at all. And, so no other ones came over to this country from Europe. The only people that who sort of left an imprint on it was that once my mother came to this country, and my father, they in turn, I think just because of a total love that existed between these two sisters, was my mother reversed the situation and started importuning my, her sister in Argentina to come over here. Because during this whole time that my mother's sister remained in Buenos Aires. And after we had been here for about a year or so and they kept communicating with each other, she was able to convince them to come to this country. And that is another chapter in the,

in the life of this family. That by then, once they came over here, whatever there was of the brothers and sisters, all were essentially in Chester. And then a few of the others remained in New York on my mother's side. My father, on the other hand, had a brother in New York which I spoke of before. and he had a sister there also. They are the ones that were here in this country and the other two were in Europe. They were the ones that I said were, went down with the Holocaust. The other two remained in New York. And there was a very continuing and ongoing relationship between, particularly my father and his brother in New York. They were very, very close and perhaps this is where, where it stems from that in my own immediate family between my two sisters and the brother, there is, that, there is that so-called glue that keeps us together. Which I think is part of our own background because we saw it happening with my mother and her family and my father and his family. That family oriented is something that comes very easily to us. I think perhaps more so with my, with my, with my one other sister and one other brother is even more significant than it is with me. Although, as I have grown older I have discovered that I, whatever

alienation there may have been at one time or another is something that I have made every effort to eradicate. Because I have an immense feeling for identity with my family. But then again, as I said, I, i think it's part of what I had lived through and what I had, what it was all, what my background was. The, I want to go back to my father because I sort of left him where he was still a peddler. and my father, and throughout this tape you're aware of the fact that this was not an individual that you could stifle or stymie in any way. And after five years or so being a peddler he had accumulated some funds and decided to open up a business of his own. So, and, and a number of years before then we had gotten out of the so-called very inadequate living quarters that we were in when we were brought to this country. And we had moved into, not a larger house. And certainly much more comfortable, but I found that my father could not be held down. and once he came into business he was able to accumulate real estate and then, 'lo and behold, the depression came in 1929 and here he found himself, again in 1929, totally, totally divested of everything that he had. He lost everything in the depression. The real estate that he had, the business

was almost down the tubes. But, nevertheless, by, in 1932, 1933, and 1934 he started coming back again and, and we all worked in the, in the place of business while going to school. And, as I said before, school was very important. All the other so-called disciplines that appear in a Jewish family in terms of dancing, music. My mother was very conscientious about that. and she saw to it that the children absolutely had everything that in her judgement was necessary to make them complete individuals. As I recall, all the four children took instrument lessons and, and, and where they were willing to deny themselves things, they made sure that the children had everything. And I want to mention that there is a tremendous dichotomy in the style of life that you had in those days. And I'm going back to the '30s and the '40s and thereafter. That our activity, your social activity was essentially a family sort of thing and that they didn't, my parents, as I recall, did not mingle with any others except some who were newcomers into this country from where they came from. And then they would establish the old ties. But it was essentially a family-oriented atmosphere that prevailed then and it wasn't until much later on that

my father became active in community affairs. Until, in his later years, it was always the family and that's where the activity was. And, and insofar as we were concerned, our own social life, as children, was essentially around those young people that we went with, went to in Hebrew school. Even though I had gentile friends in school it, they never became those that I socialized with. Totally different from what we are experiencing now, with what I see with my own children. That you have a completely different way of intercourse that just did not exist in those days. You were essentially integrated within your own religious group or with your own nationality, you might, you might call it that. I think the Italians were stuck together. I think that the Jews, the Jewish people, the Polish people, the Russian people, that was the modis operandi at the time. Which, of course, is certainly not the case now. Now we have become much more, shall I say, we, we are our intimacies, shall I say, our relationships are no longer, shall I say, generic. I think our relationships now are fanned out and they embrace other people. And I sort of, if I have to make a judgement, I would say that it is certainly much

better than being confined to your own group as we were at that time. And I think that perhaps to this day I have an identity with my, with the Jewish people because of my earlier background. And sometimes I try to explain away how it is that my children don't have the same thing and I can understand why it isn't. And it's because my background is so much different than their background. And it isn't that I have ever allowed our children not to realize what their religion is, but at the same time, I am sure that they don't have the same sense of feeling that I had. That's it, dear.

DALLETT: Well, I have a feeling we could go on, I could go on asking you questions all day, but I just want to ask a couple questions. Have you ever been back to Ellis Island?

BROWN: No.

DALLETT: Never went back.

BROWN: I did see the Statue of Liberty, by the way. And this goes back a long, long time. When I was a youngster I used to love to go to New York. I used to love going to stay with my uncle. I remember he lived right in,

where Chinatown is now. He lived where Delancey Street is. You're probably familiar with that in New York. That was the East Side of New York. And it was the potpourri of the, of the United States, because all kinds of people were there and I used to go frequently there. And it was through him that I went back, at that time, I'm going back a long, long time.

In the '30s, when I went back to see Ellis Island. But never have I been back since.

DALLETT: Also, one other thing. Do you have any of the original passports, visas, anything like that?

BROWN: Nothing.

DALLETT: Letters that you got from people in this country when you were in Roumania? Anything that dates back to that period before you came to this country? I'm really asking this for the National Park Service.

BROWN: Yeah, I realize what you're doing. But, to the best of my knowledge, unless my sister Anne might have something, and I would doubt it, because I had mentioned to her that I was going to have this interview with you. There was nothing that was kept. No. Nothing at all.

DALLETT: Okay. That's the end of this interview number 020, the third side of the second cassette. That's the end of interview number 020. And it's the end of the first side of the second cassette.