

KECK – 27/NOTKOFF

KECK—27

PAULINE NOTKOFF

BIRTH DATE: 1899

INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 11, 1985

RUNNING TIME: 24:00

INTERVIEWER: DR. WILLA APPEL

RECORDING ENGINEER: BOB BILECKI

INTERVIEW LOCATION: PALISADES, NEW YORK

TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1986

**TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: NANCY VEGA, 8/1995 (RETYPED BY:
SANDRA DICKISON, 8/2008)**

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 1985

POLAND, 1917

AGE: 17

SHIP: *NOORDOM*

PORT: AMSTERDAM

RESIDENCES: RUSSIA: BIALYSTOCK

US: NEW YORK

APPEL: This is Willa Appel, and I'm speaking with Pauline Notkoff on September 11, 1985 and its interview number 027. Mrs. Notkoff came from Poland in 1917 and we're about to begin the interview. To begin the interview, you were seventeen years old, you were saying, when you came to this country. You were born in 1899 in the town of Bialystock.

NOTKOFF: Bialystock, Bialystock. Bialystock is in Russia, when you say it in Yiddish its Bialystock. It's Grodno Goberne, if that's important.

APPEL: Uh-huh, and what was it like, what was the town like?

NOTKOFF: Well, as much as I can think of, it was a very nice to me, very nice town, with streets, what do you call it...

APPEL: Cobblestones?

NOTKOFF: Cobblestones. And, uh, street cars, electric cars, already started not with the horse and wagon. And it was to my estimation, in a way, whatever I

KECK – 27/NOTKOFF

can read of, I haven't got the book, a very quiet nice town. They had a college. They had a high school. They had...

APPEL: Did you go to school?

NOTKOFF: Yeah. I went to high school.

APPEL: To high school. And why did your family decide to leave?

NOTKOFF: Because the war, they did not leave yet. I was here two years before they came and we couldn't hear to one another. We couldn't correspond because it was during the First World War. And, uh...

APPEL: Why were you and your sisters sent over to America?

NOTKOFF: Because we had to, papa had to save us from the German army. They used to take the girls and field work something.

APPEL: To do field work.

NOTKOFF: To do, to, to dig ditches.

APPEL: During the first World War. And...

NOTKOFF: That's right. And Bialystock was under German occupation and they used to take the girls to make them work in the fields digging ditches. And the girls never came home, back, and if they did come home, they was sick. So my father wanted to save us girls.

APPEL: You and your sister.

NOTKOFF: My sister and myself.

APPEL: Did you have any other siblings, or just you and your sister?

NOTKOFF: Yeah, but very young ones. We had, the picture that you were just looking at, that was sent to me after I was already a few years later. I left small kids. That was a twin. And my brother and, that's why he had to send us away. And we were lucky that I had an uncle, a doctor here, and he sent for us. That was easier for us to get out.

APPEL: So your, your father decided, even though your father, his business was prospering...

NOTKOFF: Oh, sure.

KECK – 27/NOTKOFF

APPEL: Despite the war.

NOTKOFF: Oh, terrible.

APPEL: But he decided that he, that you should be sent over with your younger sister.

NOTKOFF: Save, to save us.

APPEL: How were the arrangements made to have you come over?

NOTKOFF: Well, I think my, I don't remember well, you know, I didn't take any interest because I was too young to do anything. I mean, there are kids, there are, I think, I think of my children now, they were younger than me and they, already they knew more than I did. It's like in some families, you know, you have everything and you don't pay too much attention.

APPEL: How did you feel about leaving?

NOTKOFF: I, how, terrible. I never wanted to leave home. When I came here we couldn't correspond, we couldn't see each other, hear from one, each other (?) over two years. My pillow was wet from crying. After two years there was an advertisement in the papers. That's in, they'll show in the movies of pictures that were taking from the cities that they said they're gonna show a group of pictures in the movies. I got to stop. (She is moved) And I said, "Well, I'm gonna go and see it." And sure enough I saw my one of the little sisters in one of that group. I'll never, I'll never forget the excitement. I said, "They are alive." We didn't think whether they were alive or not.

APPEL: Well, when you were told by your parents that you were going to be sent to America, did you have any idea of what America was like?

NOTKOFF: Who knew of America? Had an uncle was the, was in America that came there, and America to me, America was like my other city. Where did I go?

APPEL: Did you, you only knew your uncles who were in America. Did you know anyone who had been to America who you could speak with?

NOTKOFF: Oh, yeah, yeah. I had uncles in Europe that were in America and they came back and I always hear, used to hear them talk about it, to my grandmother, to my mother, and so one of them wanted, was over in America once and he came and he went back to America, he came back. Had those two uncles, this two uncles that were, I had two uncles here.

KECK – 27/NOTKOFF

They came from Bialystock and their brothers came and some of the brothers went back.

APPEL: And when you heard them talking to your parents, what did they say about America?

NOTKOFF: They talked between themselves, you know. It's good, this is good. They criticized the way we, the food we made, we, they criticized each other's food. The only one that made, like the idea that you, we can cook vege, vegetables, I came to my grandmother and she made a vegetable soup. That's for me, that's for the cow that gives us, not for me. She says, "But it's healthy, you've got to eat it." She knew that it's healthy. Lettuce. Who ate lettuce? She made lettuce.

APPEL: Did you think you were going permanently or just temporarily?

NOTKOFF: I didn't think of anything. I didn't think of anything. All the time I was home it was either studying or read and go out, have a good time.

APPEL: And what port did you leave from?

NOTKOFF: Amster, Nordam. Is Nordam a port? Amsterdam, I think.

APPEL: From Amsterdam. How did you get to Amsterdam?

NOTKOFF: With trains.

APPEL: You with your sister alone?

NOTKOFF: Oh, no. It was a group, thousands of people went together.

APPEL: From Bialystock.

NOTKOFF: Some from, from all around. From all around. Whoever was able to go. Where's that picture? A group of thousands of people. See the postcard with a lot of kids?

APPEL: So, were there friends of yours from Bialystock who went as well?

NOTKOFF: Friends of ours? Yes, I mean, they weren't friends of mine, but from Bialystock. A lot of people went.

APPEL: Other young girls whose fathers were trying to spare them from the Germans?

KECK – 27/NOTKOFF

NOTKOFF: Yes, yes, yes. And Bialystock was a big, a big city. It wasn't a small town. We didn't know everybody.

APPEL: What do you remember of that trip to Amsterdam?

NOTKOFF: It was crowds and crowds and crowds. And pushing and pushing and pushing.

APPEL: Was it the first time you had been away from home?

NOTKOFF: Yeah. No, I'd been away from home in a little town so I didn't go by horse and wagon.

APPEL: And when you got to Amsterdam...

NOTKOFF: It was always, always going someplace. And pushing us this way and that way. And then when we came to Vilna we had to go to shower ourselves, you know, that was already Germany. And in Germany all the people, no people are clean. You had to go to the house, house lousing house. We had to go to take showers because you can't go from one city to the other one where the Germans are because you are full of dirt, excuse me, have lice and everything. It's only that they are clean.

APPEL: So you were treated badly by the Germans, with contempt?

NOTKOFF: How can you take, how can you feel, when you were a young girl, and crowds of people, you have to get undressed and go in a group through the showers.

APPEL: It's embarrassing.

NOTKOFF: It's terrible.

APPEL: Humiliating.

NOTKOFF: Very humiliating. You, you look around, and you're scared stiff. You're scared stiff. You could imagine, 1917 until now, and I went though a little bit in there, when you take a young girl and had to go to work, find yourself a trade.

APPEL: Just going back for a moment. I'm trying to get a better understanding of this group. The trip and the group you went with. It sounds like it was organized together, all these people going...

NOTKOFF: They organized them all together. They didn't take any, this was the group that went to America.

KECK – 27/NOTKOFF

- APPEL: But they were all paying for their passage.
- NOTKOFF: Oh, everything is made up, everything is paid up and...
- APPEL: So these people who had, were being allowed to leave, also, by the Germans.
- NOTKOFF: I don't know. Everybody has to have a reason. I remember Papa said twice he went to make out the passports. He used to come home and cry, "I can't, I can't send them away." You know. Mama would say (Yiddish)/
- APPEL: Which means?
- NOTKOFF: Leave them, leave them here. Then he went to business and he comes back and he says, "No, this one and this one, they brought this girl, this one, this one girl never came back. This one and this one comes back sick." He says, "How can I leave them here?"
- APPEL: So it was a terrible conflict for him.
- NOTKOFF: Oh, sure. I remember, you know, first I stayed with my uncle, my sister and I. And then we lived with other people, you know, we were boarded. And the lady used to, it was very nice people, and the lady used to get up in the morning and say, "Your pillow is all wet. Don't. You'll see them. They'll come. They'll," you know, she used to console me...
- APPEL: So, just going back to the trip. You got to Vilna and you all took showers.
- NOTKOFF: I, you know, it was such a rushing, pushing, wild this, that, and a young girl and a young kid that didn't go through anything.
- APPEL: You were sheltered.
- NOTKOFF: Always sheltered. You, it's hard to think, I mean, when think of it I don't know, was it me? Did I do it?
- APPEL: Do you remember the ship? Much about the ship?
- NOTKOFF: Nordam.
- APPEL: The S.S. Nordam.
- NOTKOFF: My husband years later came with the Nordam.
- APPEL: The same ship. How were you going? Were you going steerage?

KECK – 27/NOTKOFF

NOTKOFF: I don't know. What do you mean by steerage?

APPEL: What class were you going? Were you going first class, second class?

NOTKOFF: Now, second class.

APPEL: Second class. And what, what were your accommodations like on the ship?

NOTKOFF: Well, it was usual, I think, I don't know what it's supposed to be, different. We had a room. We had the meals. And we had a scare. We were twenty-eight days on the water and we passed a mine. And when the sirens start screaming and two stupid kids like my sister and I, everything was fun. We went on the deck. And the sailors almost got crazy to chase us down. That was (she pauses) an excitement. Naturally, we didn't, we didn't realize that you don't, you don't stay on a, on a ship twenty-eight days. Before we went, came in we felt that's a home, that's our home.

APPEL: What was the ship like? Do you remember what it looked like? Any details? It was a cabin that the two of you shared?

NOTKOFF: That's right.

APPEL: Your sister was younger than you?

NOTKOFF: Yeah.

APPEL: How old was she?

NOTKOFF: Sixteen.

APPEL: She was sixteen.

NOTKOFF: I was seventeen.

APPEL: And you were seventeen. Were there other young people? Did you socialize with them?

NOTKOFF: You, you socialized with everybody. We were, all older, and the two young good-looking kids, and everybody was friendly with us. And the, the fact, I just remind myself, the fact that we couldn't get certain things, we used to go into the first class, we used to get what we wanted and we came down and gave it to somebody else.

APPEL: What kind of things?

KECK – 27/NOTKOFF

NOTKOFF: Like oranges. Delicacies. They had it and we could get it. But we never took it for ourselves.

APPEL: And you could get it because you were two good-looking girls.

NOTKOFF: Two kids, you know, they were all older.

APPEL: So you, so you had a good time on the ship.

NOTKOFF: Oh, yeah.

APPEL: Did you feel comfortable?

NOTKOFF: And we were never sick.

APPEL: You were not sick.

NOTKOFF: That's how I got. Then we came here at Ellis Island it was all excitement, excitement. And, you know, we, for when you get older you pay attention to this, you pay attention, you don't pay attention to anything.

APPEL: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

NOTKOFF: Oh, yeah. When we saw the Statue of Liberty then, that's the first thing you, you start screaming, you start yelling. And people start, when they have to get off they start shoving. They were afraid I wouldn't come off, get off.

APPEL: What was your impression of the Statue of Liberty?

NOTKOFF: What kind of impression? It's a statue.

APPEL: Did you know what it meant?

NOTKOFF: No. I didn't know what it meant. It's beautiful. It's beautiful.

APPEL: Were you on Ellis Island for any amount of time?

NOTKOFF: No, no. We slept overnight because we came in later, and my uncles was right in the morning he was there.

APPEL: And where did you sleep on Ellis Island?

NOTKOFF: In some rooms, I don't know.

KECK – 27/NOTKOFF

APPEL: Dormitories?

NOTKOFF: Dormitories.

APPEL: Were you examined by any of the inspectors?

NOTKOFF: Well, later, yes, we were examined.

APPEL: What did they, what did they do during the examination?

NOTKOFF: They just examined us. Like, uh, like any doctor, you know, you went to a doctor, you know what he does. And they examined and making notes, that's all.

APPEL: You had said to me on the telephone that you were also, you were asked certain questions.

NOTKOFF: No, not, they asked us questions.

APPEL: Right.

NOTKOFF: So there, for instance, you see, "How much is two and one? How much two and two?" But the next, the young girl also from our city came by, passed by, went and they asked her, "How do you wash stairs, from the top or the bottom?" She says, "I don't go to America to wash stairs." (She laughs) I wouldn't know what to say, but she's, she's a little older than me. But, so, you know, everybody burst out with such a laugh.

APPEL: So when they were asking you questions and examining you, you didn't think much of it.

NOTKOFF: No, no.

APPEL: You weren't frightened.

NOTKOFF: No, because the doctor examination I was always at home, I wasn't, I wasn't to healthy kid, so...

APPEL: So you were used to that.

NOTKOFF: I was used to the doctor.

APPEL: And when did you, when did your uncle arrive? The next morning?

NOTKOFF: The next morning.

KECK – 27/NOTKOFF

APPEL: Had you know him in Bialystock?

NOTKOFF: No, why, he left Bialystock I was four years old.

APPEL: How did you recognize him?

NOTKOFF: I didn't. It was he came over, introduced himself. Oh, I used to see pictures of my Uncle Sam, you know we were always, Mama was always talking about it. My grandma was always talking about it. Uncle Same this, Uncle Kdsih that, and this and that. And he happened to be a very, he was a very exceptional fine man, besides being a doctor, and besides being my uncle. A very nice man. So I was right at home.

APPEL: Where did he live?

NOTKOFF: In Brooklyn.

APPEL: How did you get to Brooklyn from Ellis Island?

NOTKOFF: I didn't. He came to Ellis Island.

APPEL: But then how did you travel to Brooklyn?

NOTKOFF: Oh, by the, by train. And, you know, that's the excitement to see the train and the, uh, not the subway, the train on top. And we...

APPEL: The elevated train.

NOTKOFF: And we were on top there. The elevated train. You know, if you, you notice it sometimes I forget words, 'cause that's the eighty-six years.

APPEL: What other immediate impressions did you have of New York?

NOTKOFF: First of all, I was in Brooklyn right away. It's not to big houses. It's like at home. Streets like at home. You know, it's, the houses are houses. I did not pay attention whether it's bigger houses, smaller houses. By us the biggest house, the biggest house that we, that we lived in a private little house with a yard. But on the same street was a biggest, bug house, six floors. You know, you know, that big house. Six floors. And, uh, to me houses is houses.

APPEL: So you want to live with your uncle. And how long did you stay with him?

NOTKOFF: Oh, I don't remember. A long time. I remember my aunt was pregnant, until she had the baby.

KECK – 27/NOTKOFF

APPEL: And then you went to a boarding house.

NOTKOFF: Not a boarding house. I believe it was with people, I mean, with a family. Always with a family. We boarded with a family. First with one family. The first family I boarded with were Germans. And you, and you, of course, they were a very nice family. And here we ran away from the Germans. But it was very, very nice. As a matter of fact, once they made something and they had pork or something and I wanted to taste it, my sister and I, she wouldn't let it. "No, you are not allowed to eat that." She says, "You are not allowed to eat it." And she had rabbits, rabbit meat. But I already was here about a year, so I said, "I'm gonna eat that." (She laughs)

APPEL: Did you look for work when you came?

NOTKOFF: No, not right away. I went to school. I went to high school. I went to high school. Work, something funny. I wanted to be a nurse. My uncle, being a doctor, didn't like that. He didn't, like, want me to be a nurse. I should be a bookkeeper. I was a bookkeeper there for two years and I thought I'm gonna go crazy. You know, at that time the ledger was like this and you had no computer. You have to in your head. And if it didn't balance for a penny, you had to go back again. Oh, no, this is not for me.

APPEL: Speaking of money, did you have much money when you came over from Bialystock?

NOTKOFF: Who had, figure? Whatever it is, papa took care of everything. And when I, the minute I came here, uncle took care of everything.

APPEL: So the most difficult part, it sounds like, was that trip on the train and being herded with everybody else from Bialystock to Amsterdam.

NOTKOFF: That's right.

APPEL: You don't recall how long that took, that trip?

NOTKOFF: No, I only remember the ride on the, on the ship. Twenty-eight days.

APPEL: And why did it take so long?

NOTKOFF: Because the, the waters were mined. They had to eliminate the mines. You know, the mines, I looked, we looked down, my sister and I, the guards, they almost killed us. We were near the rail and looked down to see what's, what was doing there. And we, all of a sudden the sirens started. The mines looked like white plates on the water. Plates were

KECK – 27/NOTKOFF

floating on the water. And the mine was like this. All I had to do was touch the ship and I wouldn't be here to tell you the story.

APPEL: So they would stop the ship? Remove the mines?

NOTKOFF: No, I don't know what they did. I didn't look. They chased me downstairs. But it took quite a while, you know, they had to, they can't stop the ship and they can't, so they, they maneuvered the ship, you know. This and this, up here, how, like this.

APPEL: They had to navigate and negotiate around the mines.

NOTKOFF: I don't know what they do. But this I don't know. That's the story.

APPEL: And when you think about it, uh, did you ever think about going back to Bialystock and going back home?

NOTKOFF: I went to Israel during the five-year, about twenty years ago. I, but to go, back to Bialystock, no.

APPEL: No, I'm saying when you were younger. When did your parents finally come over?

NOTKOFF: Two-and-a-half years later, or three years later.

APPEL: After the war.

NOTKOFF: When they came over, not, was I married already? Yes. No, first my sisters came and then they came. First they brought my sisters over. And then my parents came? And then, of course, the normal routine. You work. You rent, get a house or an apartment for the parents and you live your life. Your day-to-day life.

APPEL: Bob, any additional questions? Well, thank you very much, that was very interesting.

NOTKOFF: You're welcome.

APPEL: This is the end of the interview with Pauline Notkoff.