

KECK-003

CLARA LARSEN

BIRTH DATE: 1896

INTERVIEW DATE: JANUARY 17, 1985

RUNNING TIME: 32:30

INTERVIEWER: NANCY DALLETT

RECORDING ENGINEER: SKIP PIZZI

INTERVIEW LOCATION: NEW YORK CITY, NY

TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY NANCY VEGA, 1986

TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: NANCY VEGA, 6/1995

TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

RUSSIA, 1908

AGE 12

PASSAGE ON "THE RUSSIA"

DALLETT: My name is Nancy Dallett, and I'm speaking with Clara Larsen on, ah, Thursday, January 17th, 1985. We're sitting here in her apartment. It's a very snowy afternoon and we're sitting with, uh, Clara's friend, Ida Radosh, and we're about to begin the interview. This is the beginning of tape number one, and we're talking with Clara Larsen. Tell me a little bit about the country you were born in.

LARSEN: I was born in Russia and my age is, I was born in 19, in 1896, and I come from a family of four, sixteen kids. My father and mother, there they were ordinary people. My father was a scholar. My mother was making a living for all the children. This was in

Russian a law, that the woman would have to provide if the man cannot provide enough. And so my mother worked in a little store. She had a store for herself. My father was a scholar at the Hebrew University. We were brought up in a very poor way. There wasn't much to eat in the house. There wasn't food, or shoes or clothes in the house, but we were all brought up sort of in a nice way and all of the children, more or less educated, active in the labor movement and different places. We were scattered all over when we grew up. I came to America. We had a brother from different places, and some of the family came to America, too. And . . .

DALLETT: What was the name of the town you were born in?

LARSEN: Volacheisk [ph].

DALLETT: How do you spell that?

LARSEN: I should know how to spell it? No.

DALLETT: No.

LARSEN: It's Volacheisk [ph]. You could say Alexandrisk [ph] or something like that, I really don't know how you spell it cause I never wrote there any mail. Cause

when I came here my parents didn't stay there long. They moved away from there to Karkov. and there everybody else was. ( she coughs ) My family stayed in Karkov till Hitler came in. And that was what year? He came in Russia, Hitler?

RADOSH: Forty, after Poland was '41.

LARSEN: Something of that kind. And Hitler destroyed the whole family. So I practically right now, I'm all alone left from the children. I have a brother in Moscow which I never heard from him. But I saw him when I was in Moscow in 1969.

DALLETT: Tell me, uh, where you fit in in the family. Were you . . .

LARSEN: I was the fourteenth.

DALLETT: The fourteenth, uh-huh.

LARSEN: Yes, and I came to this country I was not quite thirteen years old.

DALLETT: And how was it that, um, initial plans were made that you would come to this country?

LARSEN: I had a brother here and he brought, brought me a

ticket and sent for me. At that time a ticket was twenty dollars. A return trip to America and back. So I got a ticket. I came here just about three months before the World War One came out.

DALLETT: Take me back a little bit to the time, uh, before you came here, when your brother came. What were the circumstances that brought him to America?

LARSEN: My brother came here way before, as a matter of fact when he came here he brought out another brother here, so there were two brothers here. And then they took me here, so we were three. And then my sister, a married sister, came out with her husband, so we were five people here, migrated from Russia at the same time, in a time of a couple of years. But I came here because I thought that I should better go away from there. I was almost thirteen years old. I didn't know how to read and write. I couldn't get into a school because I was Jewish. And the Jewish people never had a chance. So, as a matter of fact, I wasn't even registered in a school. And if you would ask me really how old you are I would know it. But this is how I came with the papers that way. I'm here. When I was going to America I came with a boat that it was

a broken boat that never went back. It was stationed, left here. And I was down in the pit, my passage was. I couldn't be on the upper class. At that time when you came with a boat like that then people came, were, the first class and the second class was for the upper, for the rich people. But for the poor people it was down below. Well, I was going all by myself to America. And I was a kid. And there was a very nice lady going to America. She went to visit her family here. She spoke Russian, she was a Russian, and I spoke Russian because I was coming from Russia. She watched me and she saw a little kid running around back and forth, back and forth, with the same dress on every day. And she was wondering what am I. And so one time she approached me and she says, "Where are your mother and father?" So I told her the story. So she said to me like this, "I'm going to take you into my cabin so you could get out there easier." You see, people that were in second class or first class, they never reported to the immigration. They didn't go through hell like the poor people had to go through. Be examined and sent back some of them, and kept on the island for weeks. And she was kind of worried because I'm a kid, I had nobody, so if they start with

me I'll have to go back. So she took me in, she told the captain that she's taking me in, I'm her relative.

So here in America when we came I didn't go through what the other people went through, but believe me, to go through at that time, to get out, for the poorer people, was a miserable thing and it was the most horrible thing. It, it's absolutely undescrivable and unbelievable what that, what the people had to go through.

DALLETT: How had you heard tales of what might be expected to happen to you?

LARSEN: What I expected here? When I came here I expected to grow up. I had to go to school. I didn't know how to read and write, as I said to you before. And so I thought that maybe I could hold out a couple of years and go to school. But when I came into this country I only stayed with my brother a couple of, uh, about a year, probably, maybe a little bit more. Then I had to go to work. I went to work. And at that time in this country there was a law that not until you're sixteen or seventeen or whatever the age was you couldn't come into a shop. So when the inspector used to come in the boss used to grab me by the neck and

throw me into the bathroom and lock the door so he would never catch me. ( she laughs ) I went to work when I was about fourteen years old. And we worked here very long hours, for very little money, and I thought to myself there has to be a better way of making a living. And then at the same time I went to at night to school. I met some young people there, too, that didn't know the language and they were doing nothing. So we were talking about, and we decided that we were gonna try to organize something. We didn't know about the union. But to organize ourselves so we could stand up, stood up for the whole thing, you see. And, uh, so we started talking about things and finally we met, a few people that knew more about it, they were more grown up, and they too pitched in. And that's how we started the unions in America. We started a union. We worked seventy hours a week. And for that we were getting maybe ten cents an hour. That's about all they could have gotten at that time.

DALLETT: Had you been working in Russia before you came?

LARSEN: No.

DALLETT: You weren't working then.

LARSEN: No, I couldn't. I took care of the children, helped my mother out. Worked in the house. But, uh, no. I only went to work here. And then we organized a little bit the unions. Then we had already conditions and we worked less hours. Then things began to pop up. And I actually begin to grow up a little. And I got to the point that I felt that I'm a big girl. And things have to be done a little bit more than that. I worked in the Amalgamated Workers union, at that time, as a worker in the shop. And one of the men that was vice, a president there, he looked at me and he said, "She's a kid, what is she doing like that, running around here with, give her a lift." So they gave me two years of scholarship and they sent me away to a labor school to Commonwealth, I don't know if you ever heard of it. Commonwealth college they called it. And it's a labor school. And I was there for two years. They paid for me. It was in Arkansas. They, I went there. They brought me back. And I already knew how to speak. And I knew how to read and write. They helped me a lot in school. They trained me to be a little, to know how to make a little speech. So,

when i came back I began to pop up. And I was active all my life I could say ( she coughs ) in the labor movement.

DALLETT: Okay, I don't mean to interrupt, but I do just want to go back a little bit in time to the point where you're coming over to this country. Um, because it's, it's hard to imagine what it must be like for a young girl of thirteen to make that trip by herself, and . . .

DALLETT: It was hell ( she laughs ).

DALLETT: It must have been hard for your mother to decide to send you off by yourself.

DALLETT: Well, we had so many kids that she didn't know what to decide. I mean, to her it was a question of having one less in the house. And one mouth less to feed. Cause we were very poor people.

DALLETT: Had your, had your other brothers come one at a time by themselves? Or had they travelled in twos?

DALLETT: No, you see in Russia you have to go, when you're twenty-one you got to go to the army. And they didn't want him to go to the army, my parents, so they told him to go. So they came to America. And they had

money, I suppose, at that time. They came, the two brothers. They were working and at one point one of my brothers had a little store. He was selling electrical supplies. And he was making a living. At that time life, it was easier than now to make. Because you didn't need thousands of dollars to pay rent. You, ten dollars paid your rent, at least my rent was paid three dollars a week, with food.

DALLETT: So, so when your brothers came, ah, did they send you letters telling you what their experience was like?

LARSEN: They wrote to the parents. They wrote to us all the time telling us that it's easier here, why don't we all come, and they'll get rich, they'll take us all. We were too big of a family to take over here. You see, with, we were sixteen kids and the family was too big.

DALLETT: But, and when your brother came through, he had come through Ellis Island, right.

DALLETT: Oh, sure he did.

DALLETT: And was he as fortunate to find a woman to hold his hand through it and take him through?

LARSEN: Well, how he came I don't know. I think they came with second class, if I don't mistake. None of the kids had that experience that I would have if that lady wouldn't take care of me, you see. They came and they went through. And for them, they were grown up. They were twenty-one. Where I was not even fourteen. I was thirteen years old when I came here and I had to go through all that myself. And if they, if they would disqualify me, back I go, see?

DALLETT: So since this woman had taken you under her wing, what happened when you came into Ellis Island?

LARSEN: Well, she had most of the trouble because my brother, brother missed the ferry to take, to come ( she laughs ) to the boat to take me off.

DALLETT: Oh, he was supposed to meet you?

LARSEN: Yeah, so she had to take me to her home, to her family home. They were very lovely people. We were friends with these people for until, we are still friends with some of the people that are here. But, uh, they found my brother after, and I went back. But, uh, I was, she took me home to her house. I didn't have no place to go.

DALLETT: What had you brought over with you? What were you travelling with?

LARSEN: You mean luggage?

DALLETT: Yeah. What did you bring to the new country?

LARSEN: I hate to tell you. Nothing. ( she laughs ) I brought twenty-five kupkas in my pocket. That's all I came with. I, she wouldn't pay my carfare.  
( she laughs ) I probably wouldn't have the carfare to come here with. I didn't have no money to make it and I didn't even know what money meant, you know, because I was in such a family that money was never there, so the kids never knew what it was. We never knew to go out to spend for ice cream or for something. We didn't have enough money. So nobody knew about money.

DALLETT: Did you bring any favorite things from home? I mean, you were leaving your hom . . .

LARSEN: Nothing, nothing. I came with a pair of shoes that had no soles, that had to be fixed. And maybe I brought one or two changes, that's all. We didn't have any. And so if I took something I must have

taken my sister's because that's all they had, you see.

DALLETT: So when you came, I, you must, were you used to the idea of, of people going to America? I mean, had other friends and other people outside your family, had you known a lot of people to make that journey?

LARSEN: No. On the boat? No. Only that lady that took me home.

DALLETT: No, I mean when you were in Russia, you said goodbye to people who were going to make that journey.

DALLETT: Oh, sure, I said goodbye. Not too many. You know, in Russia you live one on top of the other, but everybody is busier with themselves, you know. The children, my father and my mother knew all these people, but we were little kids. We didn't know really all was in the house or was taking care or was doing something. I mean, it wasn't a question of, uh, sometimes we would go to the shul with Papa, and, but there wasn't anything that you had to go around. I left a big family there, you know. There were children. And then my grandmother, my grandfather, and everybody else we, I left there. And I never saw them any more.

DALLETT: Who else, so no one else in the family came afterwards?

LARSEN: No, no. WE were here five people and that's all. And the rest of us Hitler destroyed. Except that i had a sister and my brother in Moscow, we had nobody left of the family. They were all gone. My brother, I hope he's still alive. I didn't hear from him in about ten years.

DALLETT: So, so you got on this ship and, do you happen to remember what the name of it was?

LARSEN: Russia. ( she pronounces it "Roo-see-a" )

DALLETT: ( repeating Mrs. Larsen's pronunciation ) Russia.

DALLETT: Yeah, that's a ship that never got back to Russia. It was a broken boat. It took us about four weeks to get here with that ship.

DALLETT: And do you remember having anything to eat on the ship or . . .

LARSEN: Very little. We ate very little. On the upper class they ate better. When she took me up to her cabin and I went in to eat with her and there was food there,

there was soup and there was all kinds of things, and there below there wasn't any.

DALLETT: How many days had you been travelling, do you remember, before this woman took a shine to you?

LARSEN: Oh, it must have been about a week. But the ship travelled three weeks with us till we got to America from there. From Amsterdam, we didn't go from any, the ship started out from Amsterdam to New York. It took us three weeks. It takes probably now three days to get here from Amsterdam.

DALLETT: How did you get to Amsterdam from your home town?

LARSEN: My brother, my older brother took me there and put me on the boat. I remember that.

DALLETT: You took the train to, to the boat?

LARSEN: That's about all. There was nothing else there except a train and a wagon, and I'm sure that it was too far to go from us to, with a wagon.

DALLETT: So did your parents go through a process of getting papers for you to do this?

LARSEN: Sure, my father had to go a few places. Hold your

hand there ( indicating over the microphone ) and I'll tell you. ( she laughs ) No, I don't want that to go into the record cause I could have trouble.

DALLETT: No, you wouldn't.

LARSEN: No, I mean, you see, my age is not there. I'm not that old. I'm eighty years old, eighty-two, not eighty-eight.

DALLETT: Uh, okay, so where were we? Um, so now you're on the ship and you're all alone.

LARSEN: And I was crazy, that's all. I was crying every day. I was really miserable. And that lady took pity on me. If not for her I probably wouldn't have been in America. It was true. Because, uh, three weeks nobody washed my hair and I didn't have any bedding. You know how you get. If you wear the same dress and you're dirty, you're filthy, you get out of a thing like that, you come into a beautiful country like that, you know, you look like a piece of garbage. But I was lucky. I had her. Believe me, all her life I remained with her. We knew her all her life. Ida was very good friends with them all the time. She still is with the remaining sister. Yeah, one sister is

still alive.

DALLETT: So then the ship came into the harbor and what happened next? This woman has you by the hand by now . . .

LARSEN: We all had to get out but she took me out. She took me. I didn't go myself any more. She took me by my hand and she took me down. She didn't have to report to nobody. She had to carry her luggage. She had luggage. So we both carried. I had no luggage. I had a little bit of thing.

DALLETT: She was alone, this woman?

LARSEN: She was alone. She took her luggage in one hand and the other hand she gave me and we went all the way through, like ladies. And then I looked back and I saw what happened to the other people. And when I was in the crowd going there, believe me, I would never forget that.

DALLETT: What did you see that you wouldn't forget?

LARSEN: People were crying, they were hysterical. they were told they can't get off, they were told they have to go back. Some people had glaucoma [sic]. They

wouldn't let them off. There was a terrible, they were terrible at that time to get off the boat. It wasn't just, you got off the boat like now. All right, now you go through the immigration so, okay, you go through a civilized, people talk to you. But at that time there was no civilized people talking to you. It was a group of men sitting there and maybe if you give them a dollar they'll let you go through.

DALLETT: So no one approached you, though. You didn't have to go through any medical examination?

LARSEN: No. She took me down. She told them that I'm her niece or whatever relative I am. She told them. And she took me through. Thanks to her I am in America.

DALLETT: So here you are, you arrive and thinking your brother would be there to meet you.

LARSEN: My brother didn't meet me and she had to continue being my ( she laughs ) savior. So she took me home to her house. I walked in, the house was for me strange. My brother's house would be the same thing. I didn't see my brother for years, but anyhow they were very nice, extremely nice people. There aren't such people any more. They don't make them any more

like that. They made me feel at home. They bought me some, the next day, a pair of shoes. They gave me something to wear, and they started looking for my brother.

DALLETT: They were speaking in Russian?

LARSEN: No, they were speaking, they were American. The others spoke, they were designers and millinery, for Bergdorf Goodman and all these big places. No, they, the whole family was a very beautiful family, aristocratic, you know. So, uh, they found, they looked for my brother for a couple of days and they found him. It happened that he lived on the same block that they lived. And this is how I came to America.

DALLETT: Where was that? What was the block?

LARSEN: It was in Harlem, 122nd Street, at that time. It was between Third and Second Avenue. The elevators were running.

DALLETT: So once your brothers were found he came . . .

LARSEN: Took me to his house, of course. Then I started, I lived with them, you see. Lived with them about a

year-and-a-half. And, he was a different kind of human being. He wasn't interested in the working class. He wanted to work himself up to be a rich man.

And so all his acquaintances were that kind of people. Well, I wasn't rich at no time and I wanted to be somewhere else. So I went, there was a rent school here, if you heard about it. ( off-mike comment from Mrs. Radosh ) And I went to that rent school and met an awful lot of nice people, beautiful people. And everybody helped me. They liked me and everybody had something to give me for, for a help. It wasn't a question of money. It was a question of being a human being to a human being. And in those days people apparently were that way. There was a ( voice off mike ) or there was a dab. There was a kid O'Hare. There were so many nice people that, they were trying to help us when we came to this country. And this is, this is the voyage from one place to another.

DALLETT: How about your other brother then?

LARSEN: My other brother was a working man. And he was married and had two children. No, he had three children. And he, he was a very, he was the oldest of

all of them, my brother, the one that was here. So he was an old man by the time I came here already. And, uh, he, too, was trying to work and be something like, like he thought he should be. But he wasn't, none of my brothers were my kind of a people. Neither were my sisters. Neither was my whole family. Because they were different kind of a people.

DALLETT: How so?

LARSEN: Well, they probably, they were more Jewish upbringing. And I, I got married to a man that was a Danish fellow. And they didn't approve of that. And I didn't have my family for 15 years. They didn't talk to me.

DALLETT: After your marriage.

LARSEN: After I married. Nobody talked to me for 15 years. Not that it bothered me, but it bothered me because why should people be like that, you see? There was no reason. I don't know who, ah, if you saw this morning program, people could be so nice and they don't let em. So this is what it is in this country. I don't know that is the kind of thing that you wanted.

DALLETT: This is the end of side one.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DALLETT: This is the beginning of Side Two of Tape One of interview number three with Clara Larsen. Tell me, tell me what it was like when you came into the harbor and you saw the Statue of Liberty.

LARSEN: The people were screaming and some of them were crying and some of them were dancing. It was all kind of a joyous feeling of coming to a land of freedom and a land of love that they suppose. At the beginning it was really beautiful here when I came down. People begin to get more greedy and different and . . .

LARSEN: Did you have an idea when, when, before you came, or as you were about to land, did you have an idea of what it would look like or what it would be like?

LARSEN: No. All I knew was that I wanted to go to school and that I could do it in America but I cannot do it in Russia. They just wouldn't take me in there. Because we were too many children, you see. So they had no room for us. So none of the kids were ever registered

and really, our family, if you ask them how old they are I don't think anybody would really know their right age. This is such a painful thing, you know, that you never know how old you are. And, uh, people always say, oh, oh. I'm beginning to say now eighty-five. I don't care now any more because it's disgusting the way it is. But this is how you live.

DALLETT: And so you thought of America as a place where you could get an education.

LARSEN: Yes, absolutely. I thought of America, I still think America is beautiful. And it's the most beautiful country in the world. And if anybody tells you no, he's crazy. Because what I saw in different countries, I'd choose America. I was in a few countries. I was in Spain, I was in Italy, I was in Russia, I was in Israel, I was in Mexico, and where else was I? California, I was in different places, in Canada. No, give me my country. Because I think that this is really the most beautiful country in the world. Well, listen, every country, I suppose, has their agreements and disagreements, and there are people, and not everybody thinks alike, you see. Some people think one way and some people think the other

way. But as it is, this is the best and I prefer my country.

DALLETT: How about when, when you first stepped off the boat and you were in tow with this woman who had taken you under her wing, and were you afraid that your brother wasn't there to meet you or did you feel protected?

LARSEN: You know something, I didn't now that he wasn't there yet. Because I only knew when I was at the, get out, that they didn't call my name.

DALLETT: How did that work? Who called the names?

LARSEN: Actually I didn't get off from that boat yet, you know. I'm still on that boat ( she laughs ) because I walked out with her. You see, these people didn't have to report nothing. They just walked out freely like you walked out of my house. But when it came to us we had to walk out with tickets, with passes, this doctor passed you and this doctor passed you. And you know something, the doctors never examined you even.

DALLETT: They were supposed to but . . .

LARSEN: They were supposed to but they never did. But, uh, if somebody was, they didn't like somebody, out, they go

back, that's all.

DALLETT: So you didn't have to see any official that would say, "Okay," and did anyone then welcome you then to America and say . . .

LARSEN: She had her sister meet her, so she told her that I, that she's taking me home so I was walking by these people, you see.

DALLETT: And what did you think when, did they come and collect you in a, what kind of transportation did they provide to take you home once they found your brother wasn't there?

LARSEN: He lived on the same block. He lived on the same block, so we walked home.

DALLETT: But I thought they lived up on one . . . I'm sorry, when you got off the boat and you were going to go uptown to 125th Street . . .

LARSEN: Oh, we took the, uh, we took a cab. She came with a cab, her sister. And she took us home. I remember it was a car and that was the first time in my life I went into a car, you see? I never had a car in Russia, I never knew what a car was. We were brought

up all in a small village, with nothing there.

DALLETT: Do you remember thinking, when you were at Ellis Island, uh, anything about the building? Do you remember what it looked like?

LARSEN: No, this I wouldn't remember. And I never went back there. You know, now that they are remodeling the Statue of Liberty one of these days, when I feel better, you see I have trouble with my legs now. And I don't walk so much. But, uh, if I will, I'm gonna go back there. I want to do that.

DALLETT: So you got in this taxi, your first automobile ride . . .

LARSEN: We went to her house. I stayed there I think a day or something, or two, it wasn't much, I didn't stay there long, but I remember that I stayed with them a little bit and then my brother came for me. And I went home with my brother.

DALLETT: Do you remember, uh, you were driving up one of the avenues, I assume, to get uptown. Do you remember what you felt like when you saw all those tall buildings for the first time?

LARSEN: I saw a lot of buildings. You know something, at that time the buildings weren't tall at that time. A four-story building, a five-story building, that's about all. And I remember that my brother lived on the top floor walking up, four flights walking up, that's what I remember. And the buildings were not high. Now the buildings are terrible high. Forty stories, thirty stories. Here I'm living in a twenty-two story building. But at that time we didn't have anything. It was a, it was an old, the country looked kind of oldish, you know, when I arrived. But after that they started remodeling it a little bit, but, uh . . .

DALLETT: Do you remember any other first experiences that you had once you arrived? New foods that you hadn't had before or any new customs . . .

LARSEN: You see the food was so little meant to me at that time. I didn't care. I remember eating herring and eating bread because that was a novelty to me. We couldn't afford to have that. But there, I mean, I remember being a lot of time hungry and I had to go to sleep without any food. They didn't have any money to buy, so. It was many, many times. a roll was a penny, but the penny wasn't there. And, uh, the

nickel car was not always there. We many times walked home from downtown to the Bronx. We had no way of doing it otherwise.

DALLETT: So the streets weren't lined with gold as you had been told they might be.

LARSEN: No. And, uh, somehow the city didn't look so big for me because I was in one unit, you know. They brought me down to Harlem and I thought this was America, that's all. Because after that when I started going around myself, I found out that America's a big city. And especially when you are strike. It was a big city.

DALLETT: That's the end of side two of the one and only tape of the interview with Clara Larsen, and we're ending at 1:45 PM.