

KECK-52

FREDA DWORKIN (DAVIS) KUCHUK  
BIRTH DATE: 1905  
INTERVIEW DATE: OCTOBER 21, 1985  
RUNNING TIME: 31:00  
INTERVIEWER: NANCY DALLETT  
RECORDING ENGINEER: BOB BIELECKI  
INTERVIEW LOCATION: PHILADELPHIA, PA  
TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1986  
TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: NANCY VEGA, 9/1995  
TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

RUSSIA (BORN ENGLAND), 1921  
AGE 12 (AS RECORDED IN THE INTERVIEW)  
PASSAGE ON "THE MOUNT CLAY"

DALLETT: This is Nancy Dallett and I'm speaking with Freda Kuchuk on Monday, October 21, 1985. We are beginning this interview at noon and we are about to interview Mrs. Kuchuk about her immigration experience from Russia in 1921. This is side one, tape one, of interview number 052. Let's start back at the beginning, and tell me where and when you were born.

KUCHUK: I was born in England.

DALLETT: And what year was that?

KUCHUK: 1905.

DALLETT: And where in England was it that you were born?

KUCHUK: Newcastle.

DALLETT: Newcastle. Tell me a bit about your family. How many children were there in your family?

KUCHUK: We were eight.

DALLETT: And, uh, what happened that, you told me before that you moved to Russia.

KUCHUK: Yes. My mother wanted to see her family. She was yearning to see them before they died and, with my father's permission, we immigrated back to Russia.

DALLETT: She had lived in Russia before and had come to England.

KUCHUK: Yes, yes. And . . .

DALLETT: Did she take the whole family with her?

KUCHUK: Yes, we were all there. We came to that little house where she was raised and born. I mean born and, oh, my God.

DALLETT: It's okay. You were five years old, you say, when you immigrated to Russia. So this was in 1910. The whole family was traveling. Do you remember anything about making that journey or how you got to Russia at that point?

KUCHUK: I was five years old. My brothers were, some were older and some were very, infants.

DALLETT: And, uh, what was your father doing in England? How did he make a living?

KUCHUK: He was a cabinet maker.

DALLETT: Cabinet maker.

KUCHUK: Yes.

DALLETT: In Newcastle.

KUCHUK: Right.

DALLETT: Okay. So then your mother decided she needed to go back to see her family. Can you tell me anything about what life was like when you set up again in Russia?

KUCHUK: It was very, very bad. Very bad. Because my father went back to America and, and had promised that he would try to make a living and send for us.

DALLETT: Now, had he already been to America once?

KUCHUK: No.

DALLETT: No. So this was his first trip to America. Okay.

KUCHUK: First trip to America. And he made three attempts to bring us to America and it was impossible because of the war breaking out, the Revolution. And during that time it was terrible. We had pogroms. Fire was set to the homes. They were robbing. They had, ah, you would say, you know, the Russians would chase the Poles, the Poles would chase the, and then the Germans would come in. And during that time we had to sort of adjust our life and we had to learn their languages. And that's how I came to learn a little bit of German, a little Polish, a little Russian. But my basic education was Yiddish and Hebrew.

DALLETT: Being born in England, your first language would have been English, right?

KUCHUK: Yes. I spoke English, but I hadn't gone to school yet then.

DALLETT: So, when you moved to Russia that was the first time you went for schooling.

KUCHUK: Right.

DALLETT: Do you remember anything about what that was like for a little English-speaking girl to come to Russia?

KUCHUK: Eventually I learned the language and I adjusted myself. Went to school. Had Talmudic education. Our town was very cultural.

DALLETT: What was the name of that town?

KUCHUK: Lida, lida.

DALLETT: Do you know how to spell that?

KUCHUK: L-I-D-A.

DALLETT: L-I-D-A. And so that was, you were enrolled, and were your brothers and sisters also in school there?

KUCHUK: Oh, yes, yes.

DALLETT: And how did your mother make a living for you with your father away in America?

KUCHUK: Ah, she was working in a hospital. Ah, during the time, uh, they had delegates that came to help war-torn people, you know, like misplaced people and they made kitchens, soup kitchens. And she worked there. And she was already sick and I used to help her.

DALLETT: Do you remember helping her in those kitchens?

KUCHUK: Oh, yes.

DALLETT: Tell me, tell me what those kitchens were like.

KUCHUK: It was, a built, they turned in, they turned in, the schools into kitchens, you know, like public schools. And, uh, she was cooking there. She was the main cook. And I helped her. So

after the entire city would get their portions, then they would serve the children, with American money. The help came from America. Through delegates.

DALLETT: So were many people at that time trying to get to America in this town of Lida?

KUCHUK: The only way they could possibly get is if they had relatives or fathers or, you know.

DALLETT: And that was the case with you.

KUCHUK: Right.

DALLETT: Where was your father in America? Did he write to you?

KUCHUK: Oh, in Philadelphia. He settled in Philadelphia. But before he settled he traveled throughout the United States to look for a place in the sun.

DALLETT: And when he settled in Philadelphia was he a cabinet maker here?

KUCHUK: He worked for RCA. Yes.

DALLETT: As a cabinet maker for RCA.

KUCHUK: Yeah.

DALLETT: Ah, tell me, you were saying before that he tried to send for you when he could but there were interruptions.

KUCHUK: Oh, yes, he made an effort three times. But we finally came through after the world revolution. I mean, the Russian Revolution.

DALLETT: But you received letters from him while he was traveling and in

Philadelphia?

KUCHUK: Ah, when he was traveling the letters didn't come through. But once he settled they did come through. He wasn't wealthy but he tried to do the best he could for us.

DALLETT: Um, when he finally sent you tickets, you were saying before that he had sent you tickets but for one reason or another they weren't valid.

DALLETT: Yes, because circumstantial world events. Its the World War, the First World War. And then the Revolution. It was impossible, I think, at that time the relationship was cut off between America and Russia.

DALLETT: So for a number of years.

KUCHUK: But when it ended we came through.

DALLETT: So for a number of years you couldn't contact one another.

KUCHUK: You mean my father?

DALLETT: Right. You had no letters from him during that period.

KUCHUK: Through delegates. Through delegates, somehow, you know, there were a lot of people from a that wanted to help the war-torn people.

DALLETT: Right. Can you tell me more about, did you continue to go to school through this period?

KUCHUK: Oh, yes. We had the "folkshurn" [ph] it was called. And, like self-educate.

DALLETT: And you had brothers . . .

KUCHUK: The way I said, each time the Russians would come in we would learn the language. The Germans. The Poles That's how I got the languages.

DALLETT: So you picked up a little of each of those languages.

KUCHUK: Yes, and by talking it, you know, I detected it a little bit.

DALLETT: Did you have an occasion to use any of the English that you had learned as a young child?

KUCHUK: No, that I forgot. But when I came to America it was easier to catch on. It was like somewheres I heard it before, you know.

DALLETT: So your mother then, your mother had spoken English because she was in England.

KUCHUK: Ah, very little. Very little. She spoke to us Yiddish.

DALLETT: Tell me about, did you have brothers and sisters that were older, or were they younger?

KUCHUK: Older. Yeah. They were educated in yeshiva. Talmud, Torah. One of them was a poet, used to write poetry, beautiful poetry.

DALLETT: And how did they continue, did they help your mother during the war to have an income?

KUCHUK: My older brother, the one that went to yeshiva, he used to teach children in villages. And he would sustain himself and a little bit was left over to give to the family. Plus my mother worked, so. We all helped. And I remember while I was going to school I took up a trade, sewing. Learned how to sew. And I used to sew for the family everything. Little skirts and little blouses and

things for the younger children.

DALLETT: So all this time in the back of your mind were you, were you waiting to come to America, or were you just . . .

KUCHUK: Yearning. It was like waiting for a dream to come to reality, that's what it was.

DALLETT: And what was that dream. Tell me about what that felt like to be waiting to come to this country.

KUCHUK: If it wasn't for this here hope we would have long perished. Really.

DALLETT: So that helped to keep you alive.

KUCHUK: Oh, yes.

DALLETT: Ah, do you remember when it was that finally tickets came through and you had the necessary papers?

KUCHUK: The whole town was overjoyed for us. And everyone, you know, thought that maybe we'll be able to help them to come, you know.

DALLETT: So they celebrated with you.

KUCHUK: Yes.

DALLETT: Then how did you make that trip? Tell me how you started off that trip in Russia. Oh, we started out to Warsaw. Stayed three months at a time. And then finally, finally we, we went, we got the boat in, in Hamburg.

DALLETT: So you had, you had packed up everything that you were going to bring with you?

KUCHUK: Very little possessions. They usually take the candlesticks and something that is really near and dear to you. And the rest what's on our backs, and that's it.

DALLETT: You pointed to candlesticks. Are they the ones that you brought with you?

KUCHUK: Yeah, yeah.

DALLETT: Anything else that you remember, anything else that you still have?

KUCHUK: No, no.

DALLETT: So, do you know how you got from . . .

KUCHUK: Because each time when they changed, you know, the army would change, whoever would win, we used to bury our possessions in the ground. And then maybe out of, you know, we used to forget where it is. So we were impoverished.

DALLETT: How did you get to Warsaw at that point. How far was that? Was that a big trip from Lida to Warsaw?

KUCHUK: It's the capital of Poland. And I don't recall that too much.

DALLETT: Not sure how you actually got there. Train or . . .

KUCHUK: It must have been a train, yeah.

DALLETT: And in Warsaw, you said you were there for months.

KUCHUK: Yes, until everything, you know, was clarified. Papers and things.

DALLETT: All the papers. So your mother had to handle all that.

KUCHUK: My mother and my older brother, yeah.

DALLETT: And within a few months your papers were clear and you took off from Hamburg.

KUCHUK: Hamburg, yeah.

DALLETT: Do you remember the name of the boat?

KUCHUK: Oh, yes. Mount Clay.

DALLETT: Mount Clay?

KUCHUK: Yeah.

DALLETT: Tell me about the boat. What was that like?

KUCHUK: Well, we were like, it wasn't first class, it was, we were beneath. And the second, now, wait a minute, how can I tell you?

DALLETT: Was it one large area down below?

KUCHUK: Oh, no, no, no. It was divided into two or three parts. We were below. And I guess over us were the richer people. You know, first class. They had plenty of food. We didn't.

DALLETT: Like what would you eat in a day? What would they give you for, to eat?

KUCHUK: The diet is very poor. Very poor. Bread, eggs, herring, things like that.

DALLETT: And did you have a separate bunk where you would sleep?

KUCHUK: Yeah.

DALLETT: And you were how old then when you made that crossing?

KUCHUK: About twelve, I guess.

DALLETT: And you stayed together as a family?

KUCHUK: Oh, yeah, yeah.

DALLETT: Were there any other people that were coming with you from Lida, or were you the only family who left them?

KUCHUK: Ah, we were the only ones. There may have been other people from the same states, you know. Like Wilna or Minsk. But we were the only ones from Lida.

DALLETT: Um, and how long a trip was it?

KUCHUK: Hum. Oh, maybe two weeks.

DALLETT: Two weeks.

KUCHUK: Approximately. You know, I don't remember.

DALLETT: Do you remember what time of year it was?

KUCHUK: Around September.

DALLETT: Okay. So at the end of the two weeks then you came into New York.

KUCHUK: To Ellis Island.

DALLETT: Tell me about what that was like.

KUCHUK: Uh, well, we were inspected over again and, you know, the, uh, they were looking for eye troubles. And I remember they used to take off our clothes and sort of disinfect it.

DALLETT: That must have been terrible.

KUCHUK: Yes. Because we only had the clothes that we were wearing. And they used a disinfectant.

DALLETT: Um, do you remember coming into the Harbor and people seeing the Statue of Liberty? Did you see the Statue of Liberty?

KUCHUK: Oh, sure. My father came with a little boat to the big boat to see us. And with a string, somebody pulled up bananas which we never saw in our life, and ate. That was a delight.

DALLETT: So you saw your father then, as soon as you came in.

KUCHUK: Yes. So I hadn't seen him since I was a child.

DALLETT: Right.

KUCHUK: And they said this is my father. It took us a long time till we got sort of closer relationship, because we were sort of weaned away from him, you know.

DALLETT: Uh, do you remember anything about Ellis Island, the building itself? When you came into it, do you remember?

KUCHUK: Uh, its' what, what they portray, what they portray in the pictures. It comes back to me, like, you know, acres and acres of cold atmosphere, you know. And certain points of where they investigate you, or whatever, you know.

DALLETT: How did you know where to go next? What language were people speaking in to get you to do what they wanted you to do?

KUCHUK: They may have had at that time, once you come to Ellis Island, they have a lot of representatives from nationalities that would interpret. From HIAS maybe, for Jewish people. That's the way

it was.

DALLETT: So did you, were you separated from your mother when you had to go through these examinations?

KUCHUK: No, we've always been together, yeah.

DALLETT: And did you stay overnight on Ellis Island?

KUCHUK: Three days.

DALLETT: Three days. Did they tell you why they were keeping you over, overnight?

KUCHUK: Well, it takes time, yes, they used to tell us, because it takes a little time until they contact the relatives to come for us, and till they release us, you know.

DALLETT: So what happened in those three days, besides, you mentioned that one examination that sounded terrible, did they feed you?

KUCHUK: Yeah, yeah. You don't go hungry exactly. The food is not so good, but you don't starve.

DALLETT: Do you remember that dining room at all, anything about that?

KUCHUK: No. Isn't that funny?

DALLETT: Do you remember, were there dormitories where you would sleep?

KUCHUK: I think it was bunks for families.

DALLETT: So you weren't separated from your family then.

KUCHUK: No.

DALLETT: Even from the men.

KUCHUK: No.

DALLETT: You got to stay together.

KUCHUK: Yeah.

DALLETT: And, um, everyone had to go through these medical examinations?

KUCHUK: Oh, sure, very strict. Because they wouldn't allow, you know, for people to come in sick, to infect the American people.

DALLETT: So no one had any problem really. It just took a long time?

KUCHUK: Yeah, till my father came and they released us and we came to Philadelphia.

DALLETT: Um, was there anything else that happened at Ellis Island, like what you said about seeing bananas for the first time? Was there any, was there any other first that you encountered right there?

KUCHUK: Except that we had a taste of those bananas. That's all. How long can it last?

DALLETT: But there was no other food that you were introduced to or any other thing like that?

KUCHUK: No.

DALLETT: Okay. so then you get off Ellis Island. Um, your father was there. He was now settled in Philadelphia.

KUCHUK: Right. He brought us to Ridge Avenue in Philadelphia. He had a three-story house.

DALLETT: You took the train there, yeah?

KUCHUK: Yeah. And, again, we had to suffer. He couldn't make a living, he took sick. During the time my mother was all, at forty-eight she was already like an old woman, worn out, burned out. And I had to go to work in the factory and give my earnings to the family.

DALLETT: What kind of factory work did you do?

KUCHUK: I, I worked in men's clothing. And at night I used to go to a high school to learn English.

DALLETT: And your brothers, they also pitched in and went to work?

KUCHUK: Yeah, one of my brothers, um, was taken, forced labor, and they beat him up so that when he came here he went through seven operations and he died. He was supposed to be ordained as a rabbi. He died. Seven operations. Doctor, Professor Diva [ph] operated on him.

DALLETT: And your other brothers?

KUCHUK: Ah, there was one left, yeah. He was all right. He became a barber when he came here. He learned a little bit in the old country already. Yeah.

DALLETT: On Ridge Avenue, was there a Russian community there?

KUCHUK: No, no. It was a, um, like an American section.

DALLETT: So that must have been difficult for you.

KUCHUK: Mixed, mixed. It was white, black, jews, you know, mixed, melting pot.

DALLETT: That must have been difficult for a twelve-year-old girl to . . .

KUCHUK: To get adjusted, yes, yeah.

DALLETT: But you learned English through night school.

KUCHUK: Yeah. We went through so much suffering in the old country that, you know, like we were hardened already, and whatever came along we, you know, took it in stride. Made the best of it and tried to work our way out of the poverty line. Yeah.

DALLETT: Did any other people come from, did you hear from people in that village again, in Lida, did you communicate with them?

KUCHUK: Oh, yes. We kept in touch with my girlfriends, but there was very little I could have done for them because we were struggling ourselves here.

DALLETT: And your grandparents that your mother had gone back to Russia in order to see, your grandparents . . .

KUCHUK: Oh, they had died during the time as we were, you know, as we were raised.

DALLETT: So it wasn't possible . . .

KUCHUK: And being my father was already in America, it was impossible to go back to England any more. So we had to wait for our father to bring us to America.

DALLETT: Um . . . ( break in tape )

KUCHUK: I met a doctor on the boat. I see him, you know, according to my age I was mature. And we, we were very friendly. And, um, he had no family so he wanted to get off at the same city. And I

used to, you know, he rented a room near us and he would come see me. Take me out. But my parents learned that he was, he wasn't Jewish. And they were Orthodox people so, um, I knew that it's not gonna be good. I had to give him up. We couldn't continue our friendship. And just remained, it was the end of it.

DALLETT: How did you meet on the boat?

KUCHUK: Oh, he used to come down to the, to the immigrants there, you know, and he would take me up where he was where they had dancing and better food, and sometimes he could see our plight, he would bring down some good food for us. Yes, he did.

DALLETT: What happened about citizenship? Did you get automatic citizenship?

KUCHUK: Automatically we became citizens on our father's papers. But after I got married I took out citizenship papers on my own.

DALLETT: And when was it that you married?

KUCHUK: Oh, five years after I was in the United States. In 1926 I got married. I met a very wonderful man. And we ere happy for thirty-seven years. I had two children, Bernard Kuchuk, and Esther Kuchuk. And my maiden name was Dworkin in the old country. We were in England, our name was Davis.

DALLETT: How did it get changed from Davis to Dworkin?

KUCHUK: Because my father had brothers there and they were like in business and they named themselves Davis.

DALLETT: In England?

KUCHUK: In England, so he named themselves Davis, too.

DALLETT: And when you came through Ellis Island was your name changed at all? You came as . . .

KUCHUK: It was changed there to Davis.

DALLETT: Back to Davis when you came to the United States?

KUCHUK: Yes.

DALLETT: So your first five years you were davis, then for ten years you were Dworkin, and then Davis again?

KUCHUK: Yeah.

DALLETT: Had your father given his name as Davis, was Davis on your papers?

KUCHUK: Yes.

DALLETT: Anything else you can tell me about, like you dug up that little story about what happened on the boat. Anything else about what that experience was like at Ellis Island or some of the feelings you had about coming to this country and then finding what it was like?

KUCHUK: We were very anxious to come here and, uh, we were a little disappointed what we found. Struggling again.

DALLETT: Oh, because it was so difficult.

KUCHUK: It was so difficult. It isn't what people think, that you find gold in the streets. You have to work your way up.

DALLETT: You did have that image though, that America was . . .

KUCHUK: Oh, yes.

DALLETT: And that was not the case.

KUCHUK: Had to work very hard. But when I got married I had a very happy life for twenty-five years.

DALLETT: And your father continued to . . .

KUCHUK: He was from Roumania, my husband.

DALLETT: And he came through Ellis Island, too.

KUCHUK: Oh, yes. When he was seventeen years old. By the way he was fourteen years older than me.

DALLETT: Do you have any of the original papers from Russia, any of the visas or passports?

KUCHUK: Is that on tape? I don't . . .

DALLETT: This is the end of side one of tape 052 and the end of the interview with Fred Kuchuk.