

KECK-55

MORRY HELZNER (MOISHE GELTZNER)

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DALLETT: My name is Nancy Dallett, and I'm speaking with Morry Helzner on Monday, October 22, 1985. We are beginning his story at 1:55 PM and we are about to talk to him about his story about his immigration from Russia in 1922. Uh, this is side one of interview number 055. Let's start back at the beginning.

HELZNER: Okay.

DALLETT: Tell me where and when you were born.

HELZNER: I recollect, as told to me by my mother, that I was born in a little community with the unique name of Karasubazar located between Symforaple [ph] and Savastapole [ph] on the Crimen peninsula of Southern Russia.

DALLETT: Can you spell Karasubazar?

HELZNER: I'll do in phonetically, yes.

DALLETT: Okay.

HELVNER: K-A-R-A-S-U-B-A-Z-A-R. That's as close as I can get to it.

DALLETT: Sounds good.

HELVNER: If I do it in Russian it would be approximately correct. And, uh, I recall my early years, those very early years, first of all, my grandfather, who began to teach me the alphabet. And, uh, I recall as a very, uh, child of early, early age, where I would sit there and I would dwell on the alphabet and then when I did everything just right suddenly a candy would be dropped in front of me. So, uh, this is just an impression that I have at this point of my very early life. And, of course, at that time the Revolution was brewing. I was born in 1914. I think it's important that I indicate the date, March 22, 1914. And it was prior to the Russian Revolution and things were becoming very hectic. And, and all of a sudden the Revolution comes, in 1917, and, uh, we're, we're all in a state of upheaval, a terrible hunger ensured that, uh, thousands of people were just dying like flies. And I could witness all this. How we survived is still considered a miracle by me. But fortunately we did. My father was a very resourceful individual, having been first a salesman for the Singer Sewing Machine Company in Russia, a very known name now into electronics more than sewing machines. And, uh, my mother, of course, maintained the house. He eventually became a storekeeper at this particular birthplace of mine, Karasubazar, which happened to have been a railroad station on this railroad that went north and south through the Crimean peninsula. Well, at any rate, he had to give up his business and came, we finally wound up in Savastapole, the southern most tip of the Crimean peninsula on the Black Sea. He somehow was able to get a position with the government as a tobacco purchaser. He would,

uh, his job was to provide, uh, the manufacturers of cigarettes with tobacco leaf and other products. And he, he was sent with a family to a, to a community or to a city in the Caucasus which is actually eastern Black Sea, the Caucasus are located there, to a city called Batun, B-A-T-U-N, and the capital of that area was Tibilis, it's called Tibilis now, T-I-B-L-I-S, but years ago it was called Tiflis, T-I-F-L-I-S. And, uh, we remained there living under very difficult conditions. And I remember that we slept on straw and we could sense and feel the rodents under us creeping through the night. And, uh, we just survived there while my father was doing whatever purchasing he could of the product, and productivity was not, was not available at that time in Russia. It was through an upheaval of all sorts as we know. Then finally somehow he suggested and convinced the hierarchy to send him to Constantinople because he indicated to them that the finest tobacco in the region is in Turkey. And they bought this, uh, this idea. So the family all went to Constantinople and that's where we broke with the Russians. And that point uh, we made contact with family here in Boston and Philadelphia who, in turn, sent us the necessary, uh, "shiffcarten." Now that would be considered, uh, permissions to, to travel or actually buying a passage on board the ship. And, uh, by the way, we stayed in, we remained in Constantinople, which is now Istanbul.

Constantinople. We were there for a period of about three months, maybe longer, and there were two things that I observed that absolutely I, to this day, I can remember and, uh, perhaps it may be of interest in this record. One day I was looking out of the hotel from an upper floor and suddenly I noticed a grand piano moving down the street. I couldn't imagine, this piano, and you know what the shape of a grand piano is, moving down the

street, and I was very curious to see what was happening. I went down to the street level and there was this Turk with a grand piano. He had a band on his forehead hitched onto this piano over his shoulder. He had his arms crossed in the bent position and he was just plodding along, step at a, step time, and the piano was going with him. I have never seen a man carry an instrument like that and I've been in touch with pianos all my life but that was just an impression. The other impression was that there was a fire in the jewelry store and suddenly I hear a whooping and a hollering and there comes the fire company, most of the men in loincloths, pulling a wagon with water and buckets and their only object there at that time was to toss a bucket of water on whatever they could grab hold of as their compensation for being firemen. You know, these things, as strange as they may be, just can't just remain with me and I, uh, and, um, I'm glad I'm recording it at least for posterity's sake. Well, we were there for about three months and finally boarded a, what would be considered a tramp steamer. Tramp steamers means that they go from port to port, not on any particular schedule, and we would go into Greece, let's say, and then we'd go to North Africa and back to Italy and North Africa again and to the, uh, to Gibraltar or the Canary Islands. I think that was, we did stop at the Canary Islands. Well, the offshoot was that we travelled in that manner across the Mediterranean and then across the Atlantic, arriving in New York Harbor with two boilers blown, listing to the side. We didn't know whether we were going to make it or not. Uh, fortunately we did. The ship was not too seaworthy, to say the least. But we finally arrived and . . .

DALLETT: Before we go on and talk about what comes next, take me back a

little bit, um, tell me about the family that you had that had already come here. When did they come to this country?

HELZNER: They arrived in this country about 1910, 1911 and that would have, that would be my father's brothers, and there were, uh, let's see, there were three brothers here and two sisters that arrived and his mother, my grandmother. They preceded us and they settled into Boston, New York and Baltimore. So you'll find the Helzner name in all three locations. Now their proteges are still carrying the names, unless the women, their name changed, but we had males, a lot of young men in our family. Uh, they, their families, of course, there were cousins, uh, Herman brothers in Boston were related to us and, uh, they, uh, they also helped out in getting us over here. We arrived in New York, uh, now, uh, I'll go into the experience at Ellis Island.

DALLETT: Well, couple more questions.

HELZNER: All right.

DALLETT: Uh, when you left, uh, Russia to go to Constantinople, was the plan in your father's mind then that that was how you were going to get to America or . . .

HELZNER: Well, this is the plan. I don't know whether it was, evidently it must have been his mind. He was hoping that they would do exactly that and give him this particular, the option that he offered them to procure tobacco, fine quality for them, by going to Constantinople, but I'm sure being, uh, a sub, uh, subconsciously or, uh, with malice or, not for, not malice but with great hopes and forethought, uh, I am sure that he had this, uh, escape idea in mind. To do it in that matter, legally to

leave the Russian government, once they got into another country.

DALLETT: And how old were you, were you at this time when you went to Constantinople?

HELZNER: I was about eight years old. My brothers, now let me tell you a little about the family, I think. My mother and father and three boys, three brothers. I was eight, my brother Abe was seven, close to seven, and my brother Jules, uh, must have been five. That's about the age differences that we have. Uh, so now shall we go into, uh . . .

DALLETT: And your, and your name at that time, was that the same as it is now?

HELZNER: Uh, my name, my name, well, the Yiddish was Moishe.

DALLETT: Moishe.

HELZNER: Moishe, and here it became Morris, of course. Of course, now I carry by professional name, Morry, M-O-R-R-Y, but whichever way one uses it's the same person.

DALLETT: And your last name was?

HELZNER: Now, the last name, that's in the experience in Ellis Island.

DALLETT: Okay.

HELZNER: Okay, we arrived at Ellis Island, Island . . .

DALLETT: Unless there's anything else you can tell me about the, the voyage.

HELZNER: The voyage, well, it wasn't a very pleasant voyage. The ship went through a lot of storms on the Atlantic and we couldn't even

eat. Oh, I remember the one thing then, that where we fed we would put a plate down at one end of the table and before we had a chance to put a fork into it, the plate wound up at the other end of the table. Uh, we were buffeted around. It was a, a harrowing experience to say the least and yet we had this great thought of getting away and coming to this promised land. We didn't have the concept that there are golden, there was gold in the streets of this country. We knew that once you come here you have to make it on your own. There weren't, there weren't any help, there wasn't any help that the immigrants now have. The Russian emigres now come into all sorts of aids. We had nothing except family.

DALLETT: And what did, had your family, in the letters that they had sent back from Boston and, uh, was it Philadelphia, wasn't it Philadelphia?

HELZNER: Well, they, uh, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, uh . . .

DALLETT: What had they told you? Had they told you something that would give you an idea of what life was going to be like here?

HELZNER: Well, they weren't glowing accounts about gold in the streets, but they did indicate the opportunities were there, which, given the freedom of opportunity, we would succeed if we wished to. Uh, which was the American concept, basically. I can't find, I can't see anyone nowadays complaining there aren't any opportunities. There still are. Your, uh, Koreans and others are coming in and making successes because the opportunity is here. Others have been here one hundred and fifty years and still have got their hand out. All right, now . . .

DALLETT: Do you have memories of what it was like, um, do you have any memory of what your mother would have packed up and taken from home to bring with her?

HELZNER: Well, of course, whatever jewelry was possible to get out of the country was a means of providing the necessary cash flow to survive. I know she did have that, but the things that we carried, my father carried books plus personal clothing, limited amount, pictures, about that's the extent of it.

DALLETT: And your grandfather did not come with you.

HELZNER: No, unfortunately we lost both my grandfather and grandmother to the Nazis. The whole family was eliminated except a couple of uncles who happened to be in Russia at an area that was away from the Nazi occupation. So they are gone now because of age primarily. Well, here we are now in the New York Harbor and, of course, the impression of the, the lady in the Harbor was very, it was impressive. I mean, you stood there in awe just to see this immense statue and then we were filled in that, this is a form of welcome, you know. And so you stand there and you watch and then the, then the ship, I think the ship docked at a, not at Ellis Island, I think we were ferried across, uh, I'm not clear on that. Uh, because, uh, we were ferried across from the dock to Ellis Island. When we arrived in Ellis Island we were guided to various, to various stations that took care of establishing a name, medical examinations. The name originally was Geltzner, G-E-L-T-Z-N-E-R, and so it became H-E-L-Z-N-E-R, and . . .

DALLETT: Was that a given name at that point or was it, uh, a mispronunciation?

HELZNER: Well, they just, uh, converted the name from Geltzner to Helzner.
They make it . . .

DALLETT: Uh-huh, so it was anglicized.

HELZNER: Yeah. It's an anglicized version of the name. I'm glad it wasn't Ferguson. You've heard of that story, haven't you? But, uh, at any rate then, because we were going to be there over the weekend and I'm not clear whether it was a Saturday morning or a Friday evening that we arrived, but we were to stay there. So they assigned us, uh, dormitories and those dormitories are on the second level. If you can picture, Ellis Island had a tremendous reception room. Then there are rooms all around the balcony. Those were dormitories and the biggest impression that I had when they took us to the dormitories was to see white linens, white tile, sparkling clean. Almost, what's the term, white, uh, sterile, sort of a sterile environment. Uh, the large meeting room where we were in, where we gathered before we were assigned to medical exams and various other things, that had those wooden benches, very austere looking wooden benches. And on Sunday when we got up I was impressed by looking from the balcony out of the room down in the main room and there was all this newspaper just spread over the benches. And the comics seemed to have created a, a sort of a, a draw in me, the uniqueness of seeing all this color, Sunday morning, out of newspapers, having never seen comics in Russia. Uh . . .

DALLETT: Well, what language were you speaking?

HELZNER: We were speaking Russian and Yiddish.

DALLETT: And the officials?

HELZNER: The officials spoke, there were, there was, I think there was a Yiddish, someone who was during the five days when the processing went on or we were there for one day for processing which would have been the Monday, there were people whose, who were there, volunteers, who spoke Yiddish, and were able to transmit. But they, uh, the people who were employed somehow had an inkling of these various languages. And I don't really, nothing specific, but it seemed to me they, they seemed to, you could make them understand what you had in mind, to a limitation. And they came, there were people who were speaking Italian and Greek and all, but Yiddish is a language that we conversed in and, uh, we were able. And so we stayed there Saturday night and Sunday, or Friday night, no, it was over the weekend because Monday the processing began again, Monday morning.

DALLETT: So you stayed on the Island but without any processing for, for the weekend.

HELZNER: Without processing on the weekend, correct, and we were fed a lot of starches, a lot of starches.

DALLETT: Any food that you had not had before? Anything new?

HELZNER: Well, we did have spaghetti, was a new thing for us. I didn't have that experience with a banana so I don't remember as they all tell you, you know. Uh, but spaghetti was the, was a basic fare . . .

DALLETT: How did you like the spaghetti?

HELZNER: I don't recall if I liked it or not, but I tell you, I think when you come from the region where food is a problem I don't think

you're too fussy about food as long as its there. And I think this was the reaction of all the immigrants. There was food there, period.

DALLETT: And you felt you could have as much as you wanted?

HELZNER: As much as you, uh, there wasn't any limitation. And it's a different, it's a different attitude that you have, naturally, because, uh, the condition has changed. And, uh, see, they didn't have much more, you could walk out and observe where the slips were, where the boats would come in. But I do remember the stairway, large stairway, very steep and, uh, we would go out up that stairway. We went up, incidentally, to get on a balcony. Also to go out, when left we went that way and the, I think the boats that took us back to the mainland to, I think it's called Castle Gardens, where they, we, we disembarked, uh, then we'd go through these, there were about one, two, about four doors, four double doors that in this tremendous stairway, in length, but very steep. Because as a kid, you know, I had to pick my leg up, I remember that somehow. And we got on this boat on Monday to go over to the mainland. And there family, they were to greet us and immediately from there we went to Boston.

DALLETT: Before, before we leave Ellis Island . . .

HELZNER: Go ahead.

DALLETT: I have a few questions.

HELZNER: Sure.

DALLETT: Uh, I don't mean to belabor this about the name, uh, the way it went from Geltzner to Helzner but, uh, was it a function of your

father, uh, having been told that he needed to have a different name? Or did he give his name up, Geltzner?

HELZNER: Well, I think, well, the, the name appeared Geltzner on the, I think on the papers, the, uh, naturalization papers and also it showed Helzner as the approved accepted name in this country. It was written in. I don't recall him having any problems with that, uh, it just, just a phonetic change actually is what happened. And, uh, he, uh, I don't recall him ever in, uh, later years ever indicating that there was a question of how this name is to be. Uh, so there wasn't actually a problem there.

DALLETT: How about, uh, what do you remember of the examination that you went through? Was there an eye exam?

HELZNER: Well, I went, we had the eye exam. Evidently we were all healthy.

DALLETT: Did you go through it with your family or were you separated?

HELZNER: Well, yes. I want, I think my mother took us. No, the whole family went.

DALLETT: All at one time.

HELZNER: All at one time. Whether it was an eye exam or any of the exams, unless it was a personal examination. Then, of course, the males would be separated from the females. But, uh, it was a, the whole family went from one station to another. The eye exam, and they also check, what else did they check? There wasn't any blood pressure test at that time. Uh . . .

DALLETT: Heart?

HELZNER: Yes, they also looked at your spine sort of, to see if there was any curvature. They also observed how you walked, especially up the steps, and they would put a mark on an individual who showed a tendency of being lame or something of that sort. I just saw one case of that as a kid at that time. But we didn't have any problems. We were healthy, so we just breezed through it, except that we had to stay there for the weekend and we were anxious to get over to meet the family n the, on the land side.

DALLETT: Sure.

HELZNER: Well, now, shall I go from here on to what happens afterwards at Ellis Island?

DALLETT: Yes, please, yeah.

HELZNER: We went to Boston, we settled in Chelsea.

DALLETT: Who was it that met you in . . .

HELZNER: Uh, we were met by cousins who were here also in addition to uncles. Cousins were here, and they took us, they took us to Boston. And from Boston, in Boston my father began to, uh, work in the glass business. We had cousins who were in the glass business in Boston. They were quite well established with, uh, trucks and men working for them, plate glass windows and all that business, you know. And they suggested why doesn't he put a box of glass on his back and start going around repairing windows. And so that's what my father did. And he walked the streets and, uh, just tried to find broken windows and offered to repair them. And that is the way he began his experience in the glass business in Boston. We lived in Chelsea, uh, and, uh, I remember one very big snowfall. This was probably in 1923. It was so,

the snow was so high in Chelsea that you actually had to tunnel our way through to get any, to go anywhere. And we went, I went to the Williams School, my brothers and I, the Williams School in Chelsea. And, uh, we learned our, the language and all aspects of it there. Then the family in Philadelphia indicated to my father that he had a better opportunity in the glass business here.

DALLETT: Was there a, were you in a Russian community at all in Chelsea?

HELZNER: No, we just, uh, just had an apartment in Chelsea. I don't recall my, our neighbors, but, uh, we just were part of a Chelsea community which incidentally has burned to the ground in recent years. They were all wooden structures, by the way, so a tinderbox condition.

DALLETT: So the whole family just had to pick up English?

HELZNER: Pick up English on their own. My mother did attend English, Americanization classes. My father went a couple of times, but my father was bright enough to pick up language very quickly and he, so he knew he had to function and, uh, create the necessary cash flow for us to, uh, survive. And he went out and he did so and learned language without too much schooling. My mother went to Americanization classes. I remember taking her to them at night in the evening, sitting there listening to the teacher, how to speak. That was, it was at the Williams School they had special classes. And, of course, when we came to Philadelphia at the invitation of cousins, he was able to get a job with H. Perlstein, with whom he remained for thirty-seven years as a glass cutter. Uh, in that period of time, uh, my mother, my brothers and I were through, went through school. We all

graduated Central High School in Philadelphia, which happens to be second oldest high school in the United States, second to the Boston Latin, the Boston Grammar School, which is now celebrating its three hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary. I just read that, I'm a stamp collector, so I have, uh, an indication there's a stamp being issued in honor of that, of that school in Boston. In Philadelphia we established our, our American roots more so than in Boston. Here we first lived on Randolph Street in a very, very dingy environment with an outhouse. No plumbing, no coal heating, uh . . .

DALLETT: What year was this that you came to Philadelphia?

HELZNER: About '23, '24. I don't recall which year it was. And then my mother found a better apartment in the heart of the, a big pushcart shopping district, just like on the East Side. We had one for years on Marshall Street, with pushcarts and all. We had a second floor apartment. And to this day I give my mother a lot of credit for the courage that she had. She decided that I should take piano lessons. So a cousin lived down the street who was a pianist and she began to teach me and I'd have to go to her, practice on the piano. Finally my mother decided that we ought to have a piano. So we went to Cunningham Piano Company and we, she purchased a piano. Boy, at that time, it was an exorbitant figure of six hundred dollars. And this piano had to be raised by clock and fall to a second floor window and put into the bedroom of our apartment on Marshall Street where I would be practicing. And my brothers, of course, took lessons in due time. We lived there probably '24, about four or five years above this marketplace, and finally my father and mother said it would be a better environment for us to move into the next level

of, economic level of, we call that, of an area called Strawberry Mansion. And Strawberry Mansion is really where we developed. We lived in a very small house on Stanley Street, but then my mother decided she would augment my father's income by opening a store on 31st Street, a picture frame store, and mirrors and frames and lamps and all gadgets of this sort. So she established that and we moved into that particular house away from Stanley Street on Ridge Avenue where we lived with the business, as we'd say, and from where I began my professional music career. And then my brother, you have to turn the tape? Uh, my brother then eventually took up, uh, drums and, uh, my younger brother took up clarinet, saxophone and flute. And I was a pianist, I played French horn. So we were into music and, uh, my mother converted her living room into a studio where we would be rehearsing at that time big band music. We were kids, and that was the big thing. And, uh, we became professional in playing all sorts of bar mitzvahs, weddings, and simcahs of all sorts, dances, theater and all that in the city of Philadelphia. And, uh, to this date the Helzer name is known in the field of music in this region. My specialty, after my daughter was born in left the professional music and began to concentrate on Yiddish music, although I taught in the Philadelphia music schools for thirty-seven years . I taught Social Studies in a very, very unique high school, probably the most unique high school in the entire country. It has a long name, the Walter Biddlesaw High School of Agricultural Sciences. Now, how does an agricultural high school fit into a big urban, uh, area? Surprising as it may seem, there was a, there has been, and continues to be a demand for the skills that are taught at this vocational school. All agricultural, horticultural skills, small

animal handling, meat cutting and all that was taught, plus the academic area, uh, and I, uh, was involved with the academic area and conducted a, uh, camp for the school district of Philadelphia for twenty-four years, a nature camp at the property. It was a very interesting experience and the experience for this high school, coming out in the academic area into an agricultural environment and tying the two together was an interesting experience. And I taught there for thirty-five years. Of course, I also was in the military. I served in World War Two. My, uh, I, my musical talent guided me into a military band where I played piano for a dance band, a French horn and a concert band. I directed, uh, concerts, symphonic concerts, uh, bass drum in the marching band, made myself very useful and, uh, lived with twenty marvelous bands, one of them happens to be still playing with Doc Severenson on the Tonight Show. I had some top musicians. And, uh . . .

DALLETT: That's the end of side One of interview number 055.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DALLETT: This is the beginning of side two of interview number 055.

HELZNER: Uh, while teaching in this high school that I referred to previously, I also had the responsibility of being teacher of Yiddish music for the Workmen Circle in Philadelphia, and I taught children the joys, and adults, the joys of Yiddish music. Uh, subsequently, 20 some years ago, I took over the responsibility of a fifty-voice choir, which is still in existence, called the Workmen Circle Chorus, that specializes in Yiddish music. And we are still concertizing, uh, throughout the

region. I personally have been called upon to lecture on Yiddish music at various universities, uh, as well as, uh, synagogues and community centers and various other facilities of that sort. And in recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in Yiddish culture and, of course, I'm, more demands are being placed upon me being the only Yiddish musicologist in the entire Delaware Valley. In addition to that, uh, my interests lie in the field of, uh, philately and, uh, of course, uh, music is a big part of my life. I'm on the Executive Board of the Settlement School of Music. I'm also on the Alumni Board of the College of Music of Temple University. And, incidentally, Temple University recently honored me in recognizing my forty-five years of, uh, involvement with Yiddish music with a Certificate of Honor at a recent Founders Day Dinner. Uh, B'nai B'rith Educators Unit have honored me similarly and over the years, uh, I have these things that are part of, uh, citations and what you see on the wall, there are also part of the recognition given to me for my, this being a one man's effort to preserve a heritage. And after a while those harbingers of gloom and doom to Yiddish had to throw in the sponge and say, "You were right all the way." And I'm glad I'm here to witness that. That's the valuable thing.

DALLETT: When did that interest get going? Did it . . .

HELZNER: Well, that interest began with my mother, if you were going to flash back. My mother was, played piano, played, uh, mandolin and sang, and she used to . . .

DALLETT: Was that when you were a child?

HELZNER: When I was a child, yes. She used to play all the Yiddish songs and sing them. And many of the, uh, incantations of our liturgy

she knew, and she would play and sing it. My father had a very nice voice. He used to sing with a, with a choir years ago when he was a young man, a synagogue choir, primarily. So music was always in the family and it just naturally transferred to me. And I just began to develop this interest in Yiddish music to actually respond to the negativeness towards Yiddish at the time that I began. I said to myself my mother and others who I knew sang this marvelous material and, "Why are these people saying that's going out, now we're thinking of something else?" I said that, "There must be something to this music. It has lasted so long." So I took up the position and became a rebel in that respect in the field of Jewish culture. But I have been proven right, thank goodness, and I'm here to witness it. Uh, now I'd like to give you a little about my family. My wife Isabel, I-S-A-B-E-L, has been my wife for forty-three years, forty-three, yeah, I think I'm right. If I'm wrong I'll be corrected for it.

DALLETT: You're in trouble. (they laugh)

HELZNER: I'm never in trouble. I have two children, a son who is an electrical engineer, and his wife is now in a family way. We expect our third grandchild. Modern technology what it is, we know it's going to be a girl. My daughter is, uh, married, has two grand, uh, two children and there are two grandsons, uh, Rob, my son's name is Steven and his wife's name is Paula. My daughter's name is Robin and her husband's name is Marv. And the two little guys are, uh, Scott and Andrew. That's the extent of our family. My mother-in-law is still with us. She's back there now with her sister. And, uh, we have had a good family life, uh, and the kids have had their music lessons. They're not doing anything about it. My son played trumpet and my daughter played

piano. She sang very well but she's busy being a mother and I think that's a business that, uh, has priority over everything and I agree. So that's the basic family. Coming back to my particular interest at this point in life, and that's this moment I'm seventy-one and I'm still pursuing a pretty good schedule lecturing on Yiddish music, on conducting my choir in various situations. Attending all the meetings of professional groups that I'm a member of and, uh, keeping myself moving. Because in our tradition there's a saying, translated into English, it means, "Keep a step ahead of the Machamuos." Now, for those who aren't initiated in Hebrew or Yiddish, it's a Hebrew word. Machamous means the angel of death. So a moving target is hard to catch, therefore we're, I'm going to keep moving. And, uh, I am very, very happy in retirement doing things I want to do that I never had time to do. And, uh, this country, experience in this country for me has been pleasant and righteous and has given me the opportunity to do the things I want to do and given my children that opportunity. So getting away from Russia was, even though it was a bit hairy and, uh, the experience was a little difficult at the beginning, but it was worth everything to come here and to experience democracy in its true form.

DALLETT: Let me ask you, um . . .

HELZNER: sure.

DALLETT: Um, have you, have you been back? I want to ask you two questions. Have you been back to Ellis Island?

HELZNER: Twice in the last four years I was back and I was very emotional. When I walked into the main hall and I looked around, unfortunately, its in terrible disrepair. And, of course, now it

is being rehabilitated, the word is restored, as part of the project with, uh, the statue and, uh, I was, I just stood there for a moment and I looked and I saw whether I, through my mind's eye, I could picture the situation again given the physical dimensions, and much to my surprise my mind began to really react to it. I could see again, once again, the tile. In one corner of that room they had scraped all the paint and the paper that was on it and sure enough the white tile was there. And you could see the white tile that was spray painted all along there and that was the biggest impression I had and several of those benches were there that I remember and I saw the bowls, uh, that we ate from and they were very deep dishes, uh, deep soup bowls sort of, you can really put a lot of spaghetti into it and not lose it. Uh, and both times the second time we came over we saw some restoration in place already. And I said, remarked to my wife that it was, uh, it would take a lot to restore it, and it is taking something like two hundred and thirty million dollars to do so. And Lee Iacocco is doing a fine job of motivating it and I hope, I'm sure the money will come through to complete it. And I think these two, these two, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, are really tremendous points in American History, just as important, maybe more important, than any other port of entry in this country.

DALLETT: Let me ask you this. One other thing. Do you have any of the things that you had brought over from Russia when you came?

HELZNER: No, nothing of that memorabilia is in my possession at all.

DALLETT: No.

HELZNER: No, no.

DALLETT: None of the papers, your passport, visa?

HELZNER: Uh, no. About the only thing we have is my father's citizenship papers which occurred here. That's in the vault. We have that and, of course, I, uh, I had my own papers drawn out of that.

DALLETT: And when, when was that, that you became a citizen?

HELZNER: Officially I was a citizen under my father's paper.

DALLETT: Uh-huh.

HELZNER: We came in at that time, 1922, when that particular law, uh, was eliminated, that you automatically become a citizen under my father's, uh, papers. Uh, so we came under the wires, you might say. But, uh, later on it was suggested it better that I take my own papers out and I don't remember twenty, twenty-five years ago or so we did so. So, uh, now I have that particular document. But we brought, I don't recall anything, the only, yes, my mother's mandolin. My brother has that. My brother has the mandolin. He has it on his wall as a, as a decor, a piece of decor. And it was, by the way, it was a round, a round belly mandolin, not the flat one, which definitely came from, uh, with her. So he's got that but I, I can think of nothing else that, uh, we had.

DALLETT: The ship tickets or anything like that?

HELZNER: No, nothing of that nature. Somebody gave me a Statue of Liberty recently, about a three foot statue, but, uh, it was made in 1926. And, uh, this particular bank had it on display and I was always enthralled by it. I'd walk in the bank and I'd just stand there and look at it. You know, it just captivated me and

suddenly one day I walk in and it's not there. So I asked the manager, I said, "What happened to that statue?" "Oh," he says, "we got tired of looking at it, and so we put it down in the basement." And the next was, statement was, "Would you like to have it?" He says, "You've got it." And I said, "I'll have it." And he gave it to me.

DALLETT: Good for you. I'd like to see that.

HELZNER: Yeah, I'll bring it up to you a little later, sure.

DALLETT: Okay.

HELZNER: I know you would like to see it. Of course, I think it's becoming a very popular item now with the restoration going on. I notice some of the magazines that are coming through now have offers of all sorts of figurines and things of that nature.

DALLETT: Right. Okay. I think I've asked you everything I need. Uh, and I thank you very much.

HELZNER: Oh, the pleasure is mine. I want you to know that. You want to take this thing off?

DALLETT: That is the end of interview number 55, side two.