

KECK-56

REBECCA ROCHMAN MESTER
BIRTH DATE: AUGUST 14, 1904
INTERVIEW DATE: OCTOBER 23, 1985
RUNNING TIME: 22:00
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

AUSTRIA, 1921
AGE 15 (as recorded in the interview)
SHIP NAME NOT RECALLED

DALLETT: This is Nancy Dallett and I'm speaking with Rebecca Mester on Wednesday, October 23, 1985. We are beginning this interview at 10:15 AM and we're about to hear the story of Mrs. Mester's immigration experience from Austria in 1921. This is side one of interview number 056. Let's start back at the beginning, and tell me where and when you were born.

MESTER: August 14, 1904.

DALLETT: and where was that?

MESTER: That was in a small town near Vienna. But not in Vienna.

DALLETT: What was the name of that town?

MESTER: Zborow.

DALLETT: Zborow. Can you help me spell that?

MESTER: Z-B-O-R-O-W. Zborow.

DALLETT: And tell me about what life was like in that town for you as a

little girl.

MESTER: Life for me was not good. First of all I was born to a mother that didn't want me. It was trouble between her and my father as soon as I cried in this world. My grandfather promised them money. He never had it and he never gave it to them. So he said, "You can have your daughter." But in the olden times when a man walks out the woman can never remarry. She was only nineteen. She didn't want to stay single all her life, so she followed him. She followed him out to Hungary, out to Budapest. She found him. And she called the police. She had him arrested. Pulled him to a rabbi and told, you know, in the olden time you would tell him your story and he said, he told his story. His was money problems. My mother was pretty as a picture. But, ah, he wanted money. So anyhow, the rabbi granted a divorce. He gave her a paper and he gave them a paper and they were free. So when she left the rabbi she says, "Rabbi, I don't forgive him and I hope God don't forgive him. I love him." That didn't do no good. Well, he had bad luck. My father was a soldier. When the war broke out, he was in the reserve. He went to war.

DALLETT: With the Austrians, he was an Austrian soldier?

MESTER: Oh, yeah. He went to war. But he never came back. So that was that. After she got from the divorce she went in a bigger town, met a certain fellow, which he was no good, but he had money. So he said, he had five thousand dollars. In the olden times he was rich, when I was a baby, five thousand dollars. So he says, "Let's go to America." Didn't need no nothing. All you had to do was, he was a skilled laborer and she was a housewife. They

came to this country. She told him she had a kid. he said if he wanted a family he'll get his own. I wasn't wanted. He had children. He was married before and he had children by his first wife. But they never had children. I was an only child. My father, she wished him back luck and he had back luck. He got married again. His wife died. They had babies and they didn't live either, before the birth or after, nothing stayed with him.

And he went to war and the war finished him. So that was his curse.

DALLETT: And so who were you with? Were you with your grandparents?

MESTER: I was with my grandparents. I didn't know I have a mother or nothing. My grandparents, my grandmother was my mother and my grandfather was my father. I didn't know the difference. But when I was nine years old my grandmother was dying and she knew it. She called me. I had long braids and she said, she kissed my head. And she said, "Who's going to comb your pretty hair?" (she is moved and then laughs) I'm crying. She cried. And she got a woman to say her final prayers and not long after that she passed away. But before she died she told me she wasn't my mother. My mother was somewheres in America. Where, she didn't know. She couldn't read or write. She couldn't tell me the city or nothing. So I was left out in the cold. The war was in. And I had sense, as little as I was, as young, I had sense enough, I went to the, uh, HIAS on the other side and I told them that I have nobody. So they put it all in all papers. In the Jewish papers up to Canada. And my grandfather could read Jewish. He saw the ad. One of my grandmother's cousins, he saw the ad. He was a rich man. He sent me two hundred dollars.

DALLETT: Where was he?

MESTER: In New York. My grandfather was in Canada. But he saw it in Canada. And he sent, of course, he wasn't able to, you know, he was an old man, to send, to take me over on his own. He bought the ticket and my uncle, he signed the affidavit and that's how I got here.

DALLETT: So what year was that that you . . .

MESTER: In 19--, everything happened in 1921.

DALLETT: Okay. Tell me about how you began to make that journey.

MESTER: Well, I made that journey, I told you I stayed three days in Castle Garden.

DALLETT: How about as you begin, as you begin, as you begin the journey. Ah, in Vienna, did you start out?

MESTER: In Vienna and I ended in Rotterdam. And that's where the ship was, Rotterdam. And that's where . . .

DALLETT: What was the name of that ship?

MESTER: Rotterdam.

DALLETT: Oh, that was the name, too.

MESTER: Yeah.

DALLETT: Tell me, tell me what it was like on that voyage.

MESTER: Well, it was a lot of peasants. A lot of dirty people. I told you they had no pity for nobody. When anything was put on the table, it was a great big table as wide as this room. With both

hands they went in, didn't care what it was. If it was mashed potatoes, it was mashed potatoes. They didn't leave nothing for nobody. And I didn't get nothing to eat.

DALLETT: How about, where did you sleep?

MESTER: Where I slept? It was, I told you, my, my, I was in the basement, you know, right in the cellar. There was three, three bunks. And I was on the third bunk. (she laughs) It's a wonder I didn't fall down and get killed. I didn't. I was there.

DALLETT: Did you know anybody, were you traveling . . .

MESTER: All by myself.

DALLETT: All by yourself.

MESTER: And you were twelve years old.

DALLETT: No. I was fifteen, almost sixteen. Almost sixteen. I was a young lady. But still . . .

DALLETT: What did you carry with you? Do you remember what you brought?

MESTER: Schmatas, nothing. What did I have? You had not much. Just some clothes and that was nothing.

DALLETT: And how long did the voyage take?

MESTER: It took two weeks. More than two weeks. And then somebody got sick, as I told you. And then we stayed three days there. We didn't know what was the cause of it. But then after three days they pulled over to the Ellis Island and we got off. I remember that, on a Saturday morning. (break in tape) I saw somebody

being wrapped up in blankets and overboard they went.

DALLETT: He was, he had died on board.

MESTER: He died on board. And that shook me all up. So I didn't feel good about it and, in fact, I had nightmares and dreams, you know, about it and all like that. And I knew that I was very sick. And I figured I didn't want no sea burial if I die. I wanted (she laughs) to get in somewheres. Well, anyhow, when I got to Ellis Island I didn't have no money. They send, I don't know, somebody called up, you know, they take care of these things, and they didn't get no response down there from nobody. So, finally after, on the third day they got somebody and they sent me twenty-five dollars. But this twenty-five dollars was to show that I wouldn't fall on the, you know, on the United States. That I have money to live on until, and they knew I was not of age. And my affidavits were good. My uncle was a rich man. So they were good. so . . .

DALLETT: Tell me about what it was like. You stayed on Ellis Island for three days.

MESTER: Yeah. And then I was leaving . . .

DALLETT: What did you do there for three days? Tell me about it.

MESTER: Go crazy. Walk from one end to the other. Nothing, nothing.

DALLETT: Just waiting for . . .

MESTER: Waiting to be called. Anybody that got a call, let's say, that was going somewheres, I says, "Call up so and so." They never did. They never called and I never got nowheres.

DALLETT: Did you go through a medical examination at Ellis Island?

MESTER: No, only when I boarded the ship.

DALLETT: You went through that in Rotterdam.

DALLETT: Yeah.

MESTER: Tell me what that was like. What did they do?

MESTER: First of all they vaccinated me. And they checked me from head to foot, and I was healthy.

DALLETT: So there was no problem with that.

MESTER: No problem, no. And they had no time to find it because in two hours the boat was leaving. But they had no time to find it because in two hours the boat was leaving. But they got to me and said I was okay. But soon as it went on the high water I was a dead pigeon. Dead. (she laughs) It made me sick to my stomach and my head and everything. I couldn't take it.

DALLETT: So you didn't eat for that whole trip.

MESTER: Nothing. Not a God's thing. Only that half a lemon kept me alive. I licked it.

DALLETT: Where did you get the half lemon?

MESTER: A man gave it to me. He must have been, maybe he had children of his own and he felt sorry for me. He was not no young man. You couldn't say he was a boyfriend.

DALLETT: Tell me, uh, once you were on Ellis Island, uh, do you remember anything about the building itself, Ellis Island?

MESTER: Well, we wasn't allowed out. We was allowed on the deck.

DALLETT: You were on the boat for three days?

MESTER: On the boat, yeah. And the second class, when we, these three days the second class was over there and the third was on this side. And that's when I hollered up, I called, I said, "I'm hungry. I want some food." So they threw me down some lump sugar. I wanted some bread. I didn't want no sugar. But I took it.

DALLETT: You called up for bread and they sent down sugar.

MESTER: They didn't understand it. And I ate the sugar.

DALLETT: What language were you speaking?

MESTER: Jewish, German, I don't know what language, I used every kind of language.

DALLETT: But they didn't understand what you were, ah, once you came off the boat and went into Ellis Island, you mentioned before about the kind of bed they gave you.

MESTER: First of all you go through a bunch of men that sit and, you know, everyone asks you a question. They want to see you're intelligent or something like that.

DALLETT: Like what, how did they, what did they ask you?

MESTER: Well, they asked you your name and you have to be quick to answer it. If you don't answer you're not all there. So I did.

DALLETT: Was your name Rebecca Mester, exactly that?

MESTER: No, no, my grandfather brought me out and he brought me out on

his name.

DALLETT: What was your name before that?

MESTER: Rochman. And then, Rebecca, when I became a citizen the judge didn't like my name from the other side. He said, "Look, I'm gonna name you." He says, "I don't like your name." He says, "I'm gonna call you," and he naturalized me as Rebecca.

DALLETT: And what was it before that?

MESTER: Regina or something like that.

DALLETT: And that happened on Ellis Island?

MESTER: No. That happened already in Camden. Many years went by till I became a citizen. My husband was a citizen but he mislaid the papers and every time I asked him, "Sam, where's the papers so I can go get my second citizenship?" When he'll get it I'll let you know. One day I told him they're gonna deport me if you don't. (she laughs) He looked and found them. All he had to do was open the drawer. They was laying right there. So that's when I applied for the second and I became a citizen.

DALLETT: So tell me, take me back to where you're, you're facing all those people who are asking questions. What else did they ask besides what's your name?

MESTER: Just what's your name, all kinds, quick, you had to answer, anything they asked you you had to be quick on the draw.

DALLETT: And they were speaking German, or . . .

MESTER: You know, like . . .

DALLETT: You could understand.

MESTER: Yeah, yeah. They knew I was a Jewish kid, so they spoke Jewish to me.

DALLETT: Ah, but they didn't examine you physically at all.

MESTER: No.

DALLETT: No. And did you stay overnight on Ellis Island?

MESTER: Did I stay overnight? Three days and three nights. I told you.

DALLETT: In Ellis Island.

MESTER: In Ellis Island. I told you that I was sleeping on these chain mattresses. It was a mattress and a spring combined.

DALLETT: No foam.

MESTER: No way. Nothing.

DALLETT: Just . . .

MESTER: Just iron.

DALLETT: And that's where you slept.

MESTER: If I had to sleep another wink I don't think I would have survived.

DALLETT: And do you remember the dining room there? Did they . . .

MESTER: It was a great big room with big tables and they brought out buckets of food, but you couldn't get to them. The peasants got around the tables and I was a little shrimp and they were big with big hands and they grabbed it and there was nothing left

after they got through. So as far as food, forget it.

DALLETT: And then, why was it that you were held there for three days.

MESTER: Because they didn't send no money for me to show down there.

DALLETT: And who was it that finally did send the money?

MESTER: My grandfather. And after I got, when I was already boarding the train I says, "I'm supposed to go to York, Pennsylvania." I says, "Can I get off in Philadelphia?" He said, "Once you're out of here you're in a free country. Go wherever you want." The man understood my language. So I got off in Philadelphia and . . .

DALLETT: How did you find your way from Ellis Island?

MESTER: I was watched. Police women and all, they watch over people like me. First of all, I had a tag as big as the ten commandments. They could read. (she laughs) I didn't know what was in front of me but they could read. They knew I couldn't . . .

DALLETT: Did you have a destination there where you were going?

MESTER: So I got to Philadelphia, I stayed right near the ladies room. For two days. Until finally the police went to look for where I was supposed to land. They had moved. They traced the truck and that's where they found them. And they told them that I was in Philadelphia at Broad Street Station. They came and got me.

DALLETT: And who was this that you were going to?

MESTER: My mother, she didn't know me from Adam and I didn't know her.

DALLETT: It was your mother?

MESTER: It was my mother. She didn't know me. Never. She went by a half a dozen times and she said to the police woman, "You told me there's a girl from the other side and I went through a half a dozen times and I can't find her." So the woman said this is the only Jewish girl sitting there. She took a couple looks and maybe I looked like her. Maybe. I don't know.

DALLETT: And you didn't recognize her.

MESTER: And then I didn't stay long. My stepfather was an alcoholic. And I was a pretty girl and he took a liking to me. He liked me more than a stepdaughter. And I had sense enough for that. One night, it was on a Saturday night, he came in and he felt no pain. He was high to heaven. So, uh, he head right for my room. I, he was a great big man and drunk. I went under his arm and out I went. And I'm scared of a cemetery. I went to some people that I knew, next door to a cemetery. I didn't care. The dead people will bother me, let them go ahead. And I knocked on the door and I cried. And the woman stopped me from crying. She wanted to know what was wrong. And I told her. She called my aunt in York, Pennsylvania and she sent somebody and picked me up. And I was there for a while. Then one of my stepfather's sons got bar mitzvahed so, uh, my aunt says I should go, too. To keep peace in the family. So I went, when I went that's when I met my husband. And he didn't say, didn't take no for an answer. It was a short courtship and we got married.

DALLETT: You met him at the bar mitzvah?

MESTER: I went to the bar mitzvah because my aunt told me to go and I was, he was harmless if he wasn't drunk. But he was, he was an

alcoholic.

DALLETT: So what did you do, um, once you were settled here? Did you go to school then or did you start a job?

MESTER: I had to go to school for six months. I had to go to school. So I went to school in York, Pennsylvania. I went to night school.

DALLETT: In York.

MESTER: Yeah. Then I took a few private lessons and I know how to read.

DALLETT: Tell me a bit about what's happened in your life since then.

MESTER: Well, it didn't take long when I met my husband, I think it was about four months and we got married. Four girls came out of this marriage. And I lost my younger daughter. She was twenty. And that was the worst thing that could happen to any mother. Then ten years later my husband followed him, followed her. So, he died. And I stayed five years a widow. Then one man, he knew me maybe forty years. He started bothering me and walked after me and all like that. And he even got me a certificate and all like that. He wanted me to marry him. He didn't want to be alone. So me, like a fool, I married him. And that lasted eight years. He got cancer. And he suffered for two years and I suffered with him. And that's three years ago. Next month it will be three years. That's why I landed right here.

DALLETT: So you've lived most of your life in Camden.

MESTER: In Camden. Came to Camden. Lived in Camden. Even the outskirts of Camden, Pennsauken or Cherry Hill, that's still Camden County.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. And did you patch up things with your mother after that?

MESTER: First of all, my mother never wanted me to marry my husband. After she didn't want me, then she had me, she didn't want me. She didn't want him. She says, why, he was on the stingy way. But my husband was a rich man. He was a rich man. He was in the real estate business and he was, he could make a living. He was, then when the depression came I guess everybody lost and he lost, too. But he got straightened out after a while.

DALLETT: When you first came to this country, um, was there any kind of Austrian community that you fit into?

MESTER: No, not in Camden. No, ma'am, not in Camden.

DALLETT: So you were really on your own.

MESTER: On my own.

DALLETT: And did you find it difficult to pick up the language or?

MESTER: No time. I picked it up. You know who laughed at me? The Jewish people. The Jewish girls. They sent me to a factory. I went in there and any of the American girls, if I said something that didn't, wasn't right or didn't look so good to them, they corrected me. And never laughed. And that's how I learned. When I was two years here I spoke just like I do now.

DALLETT: So it was through these American kids, helped you to pick up the language.

DALLETT: Oh, yeah. There were women or girls, whatever, they helped me. But the Jews didn't help me. They laughed at me.

DALLETT: Also, do you have any recollection of what it was like when you came into the Harbor, I know you had a really rough crossing,

but, uh, was there any sense of this in the end of the journey, or?

MESTER: Well, first of all, when we got started from Rotterdam they told me, I didn't know it, that, uh, captain was lost for all night long. He went the wrong direction. Then he stayed a while, you know, they have a certain way they find out the right and wrong or something, and they finally turned around and they went the right direction. That was a good morning ahead. And after that he found his way.

DALLETT: So you might have been surprised then when you found you did arrive in the New York Harbor.

MESTER: I was surprised. And I was tickled to death.

DALLETT: And was there any kind of a celebration or whatever on the boat?

MESTER: Well, there was some American men and women, you know. Not young ones, but like, middle age or close to middle age. They came up and they tried to teach us how to speak, how to sing, you know, like that, yeah. We had it.

DALLETT: Was there anything that you, uh, remember when you first came to this country that was really strange or something you hadn't expected?

MESTER: Well, it was strange when I was sitting near that ladies room for two days and two nights. That was very strange to me. The only thing I could do was go right there. But I was watched.

DALLETT: You were watched by the police woman there?

MESTER: Yeah, I was watched. I didn't know it but I was watched.

Because after I was about a month in this country they came over to check if I'm still here or whatever, oh, yeah. See, years ago when a young girl used to get off they used, they never found her. But, uh, they checked on me.

DALLETT: How did you manage to eat in those few days? You didn't have any money then?

MESTER: Well, I'll tell you what I did. I had the twenty-five dollars that I had to show in Ellis Island, so I bought some kind of a package they had, I don't know, bread and something for two dollars. And I ate out of a bag.

DALLETT: That's an amazing tale. Uh . . .

MESTER: I had a suitcase full of paper money and I couldn't get one dollar for it.

DALLETT: You mean Austrian money? You couldn't exchange it?

MESTER: Couldn't exchange it. It wasn't worth a dollar, what I had in that suitcase full.

DALLETT: Really? You tried to on Ellis Island?

MESTER: I tried, I tried in Camden.

DALLETT: And it wasn't honored.

MESTER: No.

DALLETT: Do you have any of the papers? Any of that? Visa, passport?

MESTER: All these years, no. They have it all in, uh, the Custom House. I tell you, when I went to become a citizen . . .

DALLETT: When was that that you went to become a citizen?

MESTER: It was late in the '30s. I went to become a citizen and, uh, I had to bring a marriage certificate and all that kind of stuff, you know, to show it in front of the judge. He looked at the certificate and it was all written in Hebrew. My husband went and got on orthodox rabbi and everything was in Hebrew. All but the dates, like May 16, 1922. And that was it. So he says, "You're not married. 'Cause you have nothing to prove. This paper don't tell me that you're married." So they gave me an address to send away to the Customs House and they sent me the date and the time and everything I came in. And I got the real papers. The rabbi did record it. But only in a Hebrew way. So I wasn't a bigamist.

DALLETT: So then you got your citizenship papers based on that.

MESTER: Yeah, yeah.

DALLETT: Okay. I think I've asked you everything I need to. And I thank you for what you've told me.

MESTER: I've told you all you wanted to know.

DALLETT: That is the end of side one and the end of interview number 56.