

KECK-63/BERGER

KECK-63

HARRY (HERSHIEL) BERGER

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THE UKRAINE, 1921

AGE 16

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DANE: This is Debby Dane and I'm speaking with Harry Berger on Sunday, October 20, 1985. We're beginning the interview at 10:20. We are about to interview Harry Berger about his immigration experience from the Ukraine in 1921. Mr. Berger . . .

BERGER: I believe in that, too.

DANE: Harry, tell me about the village, was it a village that you came from, or what town had you lived in?

BERGER: Oh, the town's name was Mahtziv, M-A-H-T-Z-I-V. Is that pronounced right?

BERGER: That's right.

DANE: Mahtziv. Yeah. It was, uh, they used to call it a town, but comparing to the United States, there's towns and villages, so actually it was a village.

DANE: What did people do there, for a living?

BERGER: Well, uh, first of all, the Jewish population lived in the center of the town and most of them had little stores, like stalls. And selling anything from, uh, earrings, the Jewish population could not afford to buy those things, but it was for the peasants, the farms and the suburbs. Uh, the peasants were not rich either, but they, every one had like a farm, a family farm. And some had vegetable gardens. So, uh, mostly the Jewish population made a living on the peasants. In some cases it was like barter, you know what I mean? They bought some vegetables, and people sold them something else which they could use. Ah, eighty percent of the population was poor. Ten percent were more or less, they lived at a normal, I would call lower middle income, and ten percent was plain beggars going around begging. Ah, to give you an idea, the eighty percent, mostly kids going around barefooted, and, uh, just try to make, just to survive, getting along. As far as education's concerned, uh, mostly

peasants didn't go to school, there was no school in the farms or villages. And to travel to town, they didn't want to bother, and when, uh, kids got to be five or six they put 'em in the field to help them work. As far as the Jewish population's concerned, most of them, as I said before, had little stores. And then for, uh, tailors, shoemakers, dressmakers, eh, just, also, mostly working for the farms, and my struggle began, uh, I was born 1905. That time it was, if you know, it was pogroms, you know, the russian people were more or less were anti-Semitic, and they simply pressured them, you could not go to a public school, there weren't any. Especially for the Jewish, because the public school was, uh, controlled by the church. So mostly Jewish kids, in my category, went to, they used to call it Chader, in other words, it's a one room school. In that room was in the house, we had the teacher, lived, or what's called the (Yiddish). At three years of age, they wrapped you up in a talis. You know what a talis is, a praying shawl.

DANE: Uh-huh.

BERGER: And they took you into that room, that one room

school, and they put you down on a hard bench. Usually a child, at the age of three, you know, get scared, so the teacher, the rabbi, while you pointed to the alphabet, if you started the Jewish alphabet, and the child was crying, and he told him to look in the book, so he had a handful full of candy, and he kept his arm over his head, and rubbed the candy on the book, and he told him you know who gave you the candy? The angel, 'cos you're a good boy.

(he laughs) So that's how they were initiated. Well, it was no ball playing or anything like it, sitting for about eight o'clock in the morning until about, uh, five, six o'clock in the evening. And the parents usually, you know, they used to take along the sandwich, or the parents used to bring to the school some kind of a lunch. Uh . . .

DANE: Would you go to school with your brothers also, or was it just you?

BERGER: I was the youngest. My brothers had the same upbringing. I had two brothers.

DANE: Any sisters?

BERGER: Yeah. I had three sisters. And, actually, my older

sister, we had an uncle in the big city, so she went there, and he found her some employment there. The other two sisters, eh, learned dressmaking, and they were making dresses for the peasants, and that's how we got along. The reason the sisters had to support us is 'cause, uh, my father was a very good cabinetmaker, and, uh, he could hardly make a living, number one, he was working out, but still couldn't make it. Then my older sister was eighteen years old.

In those years in Europe, a girl, if she wasn't married by eighteen, she was considered an old maid. You couldn't get a boy to marry the girl unless she gave him a dowry. The dowry consisted of about three hundred ruples, which was equal to about a hundred and fifty dollars. Well, my father could never save up that much money. So the people from the town, most of the people do the same thing, they went to the United States and tried to save up a couple dollars for a dowry, and then come back and marry after that. Ah, my father left when I was only two years old, I don't remember. But he was very, very religious. He never worked on the Sabbath. And when he came to the United States, he got a job, but when it came Friday, he asked to get paid, so the boss told him if you don't

come in on Saturday, I cannot use you. So he couldn't get a job. The man was plain starving. He told me, he was living on, at that time they had saloons, and when you go in, for five cents, you get what you call a stein of beer. So on the, on the bar was all kind of food, snacks, like herring and black bread and all this here, so for the nickel he had a lunch.

DANE: But he came over, and then did he come back to . . .

BERGER: No, I will finish.

DANE: Okay.

BERGER: So, as far as getting a room, he got a job as a night watchman in a shop. This way he was, he was watching at night, and he didn't have to pay rent, and that's how he got along. Ah, it was not question of sending us the money to get along, because he didn't have it. Then my older sister wanted to come to America. So, first of all, he didn't have the money to send her to come here, and number two, he thought that the Jewish religion, I mean, Jewish people, religious, could not get along here, because everybody is free, and he don't want her to, not to keep the religion. So she didn't come. I, on the other hand, was uh, trying to

study and got along as best I could, but, uh, I was pretty good, if I may say so myself, and I was advanced, to what you call a seminary. In a small town.

DANE: Were you studying . . .

BERGER: Where only taught religion, nothing else. Not even writing, just, uh, printed works. Well, I wanted to learn a little bit the language, which was Russian, so there was a boy there, his father had a little store, and he was a little better off than I was. So he got him a tutor to teach him the Russian language. And that teacher, that tutor used to come in in that school where we learned the, the religion, and he taught him the Russian. I couldn't afford a tutor, so I used, so I used to sit near him and take notes.

DANE: That's smart. So you used to speak Yiddish, or . . .

BERGER: Yiddish. Yeah.

DANE: No Russian.

BERGER: Well, you had to learn a little bit Russian just from conversation, because otherwise you can't, couldn't

contact the people. So you learned a little bit Russian, but not anything to brag about, just to get along. Then when I, at the age of eight, I advanced so much, that the school in the little town where I lived didn't have any teachers for me. So I went, I had an uncle in a big city. It's called Rovno.

DANE: Could you spell that?

BERGER: R-O-V-N-O. And I had an uncle, and there, by the seminary, was a teacher already, higher up, like, eh, the Talmud, and a little, going up, further up, and you had to live there. There was no dormitory, so we used to sleep on the benches. During the day we studied, and use your coat as a pillow.

(he is moved) (break in tape) Well, as far as food is concerned, the principal from that Yeshiva had a list from well-to-do people that they gave each student a day's food. So you had to go to, every day you had to go to a different home, and get your food.

(he is moved) Well, I came to my uncle and I showed him seven addresses where I have to go, every day to a different home. And he was a tailor, he was poor himself. He said, look here, no matter how I am, you're not going to eat in different homes. You'll

eat with us, whatever we eat you'll eat, too. Well, this was, went on for about two years, three years, and I was away from home, but I used to write to my mother, she used to tell me how things are bad, news.

so, in my studies I advanced very good. Then, in Europe, the First World War broke out in 1914. So, when we were not far from the German and Austrian border and then, in 1915 we were occupied by the Germans and Austrians. And they treated us like, uh, occupational forces, you know what I mean? First of all, they, uh, they took away the, the, let's say, the cows, horses, and people couldn't, didn't have any milk, or any other perishable food, and they used to dole out half a pound of bread for each, uh, person, and that's what you had to do. And, I'll tell you something, I used to watch my mother, she used to take off her piece of bread, a small portion, and give it to us. Finally, after 1916, they want to indoctrinate the children into the Germans, you know what I mean. They shouldn't be, like, enemy occupied. So they opened the school, and the deal was, in school, you used to get a slice of bread and a glass of tea with one lump of sugar. So this was incentive to go to school, and besides, uh, I, I learned pretty good the

German language. As a matter of fact, the following year they came around to the school, uh, the German occupied, and they asked would anybody could be interpreting between the Gentiles who spoke Ukrainian, and the Germans couldn't understand it. So I was, I was only, at that time, uh, eleven years old. So I was interpreter at the railroad station. So I got another extra piece of bread. And I get along my wife, my wife comes from the same town, and she used to serve the, the tea and the bread. She was two years younger than I was. But she gave me two lumps of sugar. So now I get her along, you know, I was at the time eleven, she was nine, so that's how you got me in. And I married her later, at the United States. We were married fifty-eight, eh, fifty-eight years, so, I still kid her about this here. So, uh, anyway, we didn't, we were cut off from my father 'cause there was no way of getting any mail or, um, he didn't have any money, but we didn't get, we didn't even hear from him. We didn't know whether he was dead or alive. So until, this went on until 1919, and I was, '14, '19, that's, uh, five years that we were not in touch with him. And there was plenty of time, but, actually, we were starving. Well, as far as us is concerned, we're

not as bad off, because my sisters used to make clothes for the peasants, so they used to barter. In other words, they used to bring some corn or wheat. To mill that wheat, that corn or wheat, there was, uh, a mill, a windmill, but the Germans took it over, they occupied it. So we used to go to the peasants, and they had like two big stones that you turn with your hand and it grinds it. It doesn't make flour, flour, but grinds it up. But that stone weighs about a hundred pounds, so sister said she'll come along and help me. She was only about two years older, and then she was, she's still a woman, so she could, so I took her, instead of dragging that stone, I have to drag you, too. And we used to, this here, grind up wheat, or whatever it is, we used to mix it with potatoes and make bread out of it, and that's how we lived a little better than the average person.

DANE: Did you think about going to America at all during all of this?

BERGER: Well, first of all, America, I mean, you, having nothing, you don't know geography, it's a long, long way, it's too far away, number one, and number two, we had no means, we couldn't travel. Then, finally, in

1919, we started to get letters from my father. My father couldn't read or write neither. He could pray, he could read the printed, uh, prayers, but not in writing. So he had to ask somebody else to write for him. And my mother couldn't write neither, so I used to be my mother's secretary, and write her letters. Finally, he didn't have enough money to bring us over.

Of course, we told him definitely, we suffered so much during the war, we don't want no part of it. And he had borrowed some money and he brought us over here. Uh, as far as traveling, first of all, we had to go to Warsaw and get the passports to come into the United States. So we waited in Warsaw three weeks. My older brother used to get up four o'clock in the morning and go to the American Consulate in Warsaw and wait, he's next, and it was so many people that it took three weeks until finally we get it. Then we started the journey to, I remember we went by train to Danzig, which was the port nearest to Warsaw. And over there, we were in quarantine for a week.

DANE: In Danzig.

BERGER: In Danzig. You know, examining your eyes and everything else, and, uh, as a matter of fact, my

present wife, my wife, eh, were traveled here the same time with us. But, uh, her sister had something wrong with her eyes, so they had to treat it before they can give her permission to go. So we were quarantined and remained in Danzig for another week. And, eh, then we left Danzig, I look up now, and I have an idea, Danzig is like part of the North Sea, and you had to travel north to the Keel Canal [ph], which runs from there to Bremen, and the boat was very slow. You could walk faster than the boat. Finally, we came to Bremen, and there I got there to take on ballast or coal, because at that time the boats were coal burning, and they didn't even let us off the ship. We had to stay in. Actually, we were in steerage.

DANE: Before you go to steerage, when you left your town, did you leave with a lot of people, it sounds like, or just your family?

BERGER: No, there was quite a few people. Uh, the influx was so great, that people just didn't want no part of Europe. As a matter of fact, if you, the book brings it up, and, uh, there you got together with people from all over, different countries, traveling. And, uh, I remember the steerage, usually it was freighter.

Number one, there was so much, the influx was so great they didn't have enough passenger boats so they used freighters. And number two it was cheaper too, because we didn't have a heck of a lot left over after we bought the tickets. As a matter of fact, uh, when I came here, I was sixteen-and-a-half, close to seventeen, and in order I should go on half ticket, I had to give my age as sixteen. So, and this way I came here on half ticket.

DANE: Do you remember how much it cost?

BERGER: Oh, I think it must have been about a hundred and forty-five dollars a ticket.

DANE: Wow, that sounds like a lot.

BERGER: And, uh, my older brother was here in the United States, so we had, my sister-in-law and two children, going at the same time. And I remember one incident, uh, they used to be, it's like old where the put, uh, going to Europe, they used to carry freight. And this year must have been, I think we were below the water level, you never saw the lights, and there was about fifty people in one part, men separate and women separate. But I had my little nephew who was that

time six years old, so they used to stay in line to get your food. The food consisted mostly of soup, potato and maybe a piece of herring, but the children used to get milk, too, a glass of milk. So, when he were standing in line with the children, so when came next to get his food, they told him he's too, he's too old for it, he has to go in the grown-up line. So when we went to the grown-up line, they told him he's too young. (he laughs) So, you know, a child, six years old says what shall I do? I go in one line, they say I'm too old. I go in the other line, they say I'm too young. I mean, uh, it was tragic, but it was, same time, it was funny, too. So, finally, we got, came over here, and then . . .

DANE: How long did it take you?

BERGER: It took us, from Danzig to New York, took us three weeks.

DANE: And, I read that people get sick on the boat. Do you remember having that happen?

BERGER: Oh, yeah, sure. The only thing is, I'll tell you something, I don't know what happened to me, but I was never sick. But being it's a freighter, and during

and it was the month of January where the weather was very rough and you could see, I used to watch the boat, like, going into a ditch, it could be about twenty or thirty feet, and the boat was going up and down, up and down, and if you looked at the people, they used to stay at the railing and, excuse me, and vomit out.

DANE: Do you remember what you would you do every day just, would you, did you play, did you find boys your age?

BERGER: Well, I'll tell you something. Going through desperation and hunger and everything else, so you thank God you're alive. You don't look for any, uh, luxuries, the only thing that there were second class passengers, so once I sneaked up and I saw that people are plain living, and they sit on the regular dining room and eat. But one sailor said you don't belong here, you belong down, down there. But, eh, before entering New York, they notified the boat that New York port is overcrowded, and Ellis Island is so choked up that people instead used to take to go to the examination, it used to take them three days on Ellis Island until they were left off. So at the boat, instead of coming into New York harbor, we went

to Boston. So we had our examination in Boston, which took us about a day and a half.

DANE: Do you remember what they did?

BERGER: Oh, they examined you, especially your eyes, you know, for glaucoma.

DANE: Did they turn up your eyelids?

BERGER: That's right.

DANE: Do you remember that?

BERGER: Yeah, sure.

DANE: And your ears, did they look in . . .

BERGER: They had to look in your ears, and then they give you a shower, which has some kind of chemicals in it, and that would clean you up. And this here, you used to burn like hell.

DANE: Did you, did you have lice or something from the boat?

BERGER: Well, this you cleared up in Danzig. You couldn't get on the boat until, that's why they kept us there for a week's time. And there you went to a different doctor, and different, and all the time standing in

line. And you meet, met up with all kind of people, you see. The languages were different. You couldn't communicate. It was, uh, it was miserable. Finally we came into Boston, so we had our examination there, which took a day, but being it was a big boat, I was asking before how long does it usually take from Boston to New York, so they told me by train takes about five hours, by boat takes about twelve hours. Of course, a small boat goes to the Long Island Sound.

DANE: Uh-huh.

BERGER: Which is a shortcut. But a big boat couldn't get into the sound, so they had to go all around, to go out to sea. So it took us almost two days.

DANE: To get . . .

BERGER: To go from Boston to New York.

DANE: Okay. This is the end of side one, it's 10:50, of Harry Berger's interview number 063.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DANE: This is side tow of the interview with Harry Berger,

number 063. We're in Rockville, Maryland, and it is 10:55. Coming into New York.

DANE: Well, we were told, we were talking about the Statue of Liberty, so we were told that you, about ten hours before you come into New York you can see the Statue of Liberty already. And everybody was running to the railing to watch. First of all, it was a foggy day, you couldn't see much, and everybody was staring, trying to find out where the Statue of Liberty is. And then finally about, uh, say, about five, six miles before entering the harbor, we finally saw it, and everybody let out a scream and it was really a joy because, you know, you read it, and sometimes you don't read the right thing, and they explain you what the Statue of Liberty means, why it was put there, and they also told us that underneath, on the pedestal of the statue, there's, uh, a writing which says give me your poor, and all that stuff, and actually, you know, we thought, we knew, that's it. And being, we were deprived living, deprivation and everything else, so everybody put their hopes on, and everybody was dancing, and for joy and everything else. And, uh . . .

DANE: Were you excited to come to America?

BERGER: Oh, sure. Everybody was.

DANE: Did you miss, when you left your home town, was it, were you sad, was it at all sad to be leaving or did you, you couldn't wait to get out.

BERGER: Well, I had some friends there and, uh, we were sorry we were leaving. But, see, the hope was so tremendously that you lived a different life entirely, you get all the liberty and freedom and, uh, whatever your, if you're willing to work hard, you can become rich and famous and all that stuff. You know, when you're young you have your hopes up, and that covers almost everything else.

DANE: Did you leave also because of the pogroms, or was it more just because of the poverty?

BERGER: More for poverty, of course, you see. And, uh, small towns, there wasn't so many pogroms, it was mostly in the bigger towns. The only thing we experienced was, being the peasants used to come to town, and there was the church. And the priest told them that the Jews killed Christ. So to get even they used to break the

windows, and they got a hold of a Jewish boy or a man they used to beat him up, too. But that's about the worst of it. But the main thing is this, deprivation.

And I think it's this that we had so much hopes that my brother and my father met us at the boat. I remember it was on 34th Street and the Hudson River, and I guess they were poor enough, too, so, uh, now I realized why, and I had the same question over again, but I guess I couldn't help, he had big bundles, and my brother took the 34th Street crosstown car to the subway, which is on, I believe, Seventh Avenue. So with all the bundles we had to carry from the streetcar to the subway, and finally my brother lived in Brooklyn at that time, and we traveled all the way to Brooklyn and over there he had a nice house there, and my father, after he brought us over, you know, he remained penniless. So he took us, he called it an apartment, on the Lower East Side, in the back of a cleaning store, so there was one room, and a kitchen, and the toilet was in the yard. And, in Europe, we had our own house, it was a shanty, but it was a home.

But over here we came in, and it wasn't at all what we expected for. I remember my sister started to cry, and, uh, why did he have to bring us over here? In

Europe at least we had our own home, we had some fresh air, over here it was smell, and everything. It was awful. If you ever walk, ay, before your days. Now the East Side is not so bad, but at that time it was really, it was indescribable how bad it was. And my mother was a very smart woman. She says don't worry, we'll get along. Uh, my sisters were good dressmakers so they got a job in alteration in, uh, a store where they sell clothes, and my brother and I, being we had a background of furniture, so we both started to work in a furniture store. He worked in one and I worked in one. Uh, I remember my pay was fifteen dollars a week, but, uh, from those fifteen dollars, my mother took off five dollars from each one every week and she put it in a bank. Within a year-and-a-half she saved up three thousand dollars.

DANE: Wow.

BERGER: She used to go by to pushcarts, you know, you get everything cheap. And she went, at the time, uh, Brooklyn there's a part called Ball park, it was building up there, and we had a cousin living there. My mother couldn't speak a word of English, and how she got to Brooklyn I don't know. But she got to

Brooklyn to my, to her cousin, and told him the story, that we can't live on the East Side any more, it's getting worse. So he went with her, and he helped her buy a four-family house, I remember at the time the house cost sixteen thousand dollars. So she paid the down payment, three thousand dollars, and after that she got a mortgage. How she did all this thing I don't know, but she did it all by herself. My father was sick from working so hard he couldn't do anything. So she was the brain and everything else, and was beautiful, the first time, we had the parqueted floor, steam heat, it was, like heaven.

DANE: Just like the promise.

BERGER: Yeah. So, ah, she rented out the three apartments, it was four apartments, three rooms each. so she rented out three apartments and the money that left over from the rent, our apartment was almost, with that, paid very little. And, uh, we started to live like human beings.

DANE: Tell me, before we go further, going back, when you came into New York Harbor.

BERGER: Yeah.

DANE: It was on the same freighter, that you had come from Boston and from Danzig?

BERGER: Yeah. The same boat, yeah.

DANE: and then, did you have to go through Ellis Island at all or, since you'd done all your . . .

BERGER: No. 'Cause the, all the examinations that went through, on the boat, all the examinations that we had to go through on Ellis Island, we had them in Boston. So when we came here we were all free and clear.

DANE: Do you remember if you, I read that at that year people had to pay twenty-five dollars a person to get in. Do you remember if that's what happened?

BERGER: Well, uh, I think, you see, we had the visas, and the passports, was made out in New York. And, in other words, us, my father, two brothers, and my sister and her children her husband brought over. And they had to sign that they had enough to support us. In other words, the whole idea of the twenty-five dollars was, you shouldn't have to go to welfare, you should have enough money until you get to yourself. That was the idea. That was before the war. After this, I guess,

they modified it yet. Of course, somebody brought you over. Unless you came yourself, then you had to show that you wouldn't go on the, uh, relief, or public to help you out.

DANE: And, as a sixteen year old, were you, what did you think about? Was it just a big adventure, or were you old enough to sort of be a little frightened, or . . .

BERGER: (he laughs) I'll tell you, it was, it was, to us, an adventure, and the other way it was a little scary, you know what I mean, coming from a very small town in Europe, and here it's a big city.

DANE: And even, had you traveled outside, besides going to your uncle's, had you been . . .

BERGER: No, no, no.

DANE: What things impressed you, do you remember?

BERGER: Well, the impression was things that you watched, how some people driving around in cars, and, if somebody would tell me then that I'll have a car and drive a car I would tell the person he's crazy. (he laughs)
I just had no way of getting there, but, uh, I mean, uh, the thing is this, you see, uh, being we didn't

get an education in Europe, so whether nature provides for it or what, but it's, we get a lot of common sense. In other words, you reason out, you try to figure the pros and cons. And watching, and reading about it, newspapers, that, uh, in order to get where you want, to achieve anything, you have to put your shoulder to the wheel. Nothing comes easy. The only thing is, some people had the misconception. In Europe, they were told, when you come to the United States, all you need is a shovel, was the gold, (he laughs) off the streets, all you have to do is shovel it up.

DANE: Is that what they'd say?

BERGER: Yeah. You know, there was a lot of people a little bit ignorant about and, uh, America was, uh, supposed to be a fairyland being, and being, as I said before, most of the people were illiterate, so all they learn is by, uh, word of mouth, that one person was in the United States, came over and told them it's this and that. But, uh, you see, I found out that if you want to get anywheres, there's no substitute for hard work. You have to be ambitious and you have to have a clear mind. The only thing is, uh, I was married 1928 to

the same girl, I told you, I met in Europe, because we lived in a small town, and everybody knows each other.

And, uh, sometimes I tell my wife, to this very day, that, uh, if Reagan would have sense, he would appoint her as, uh, a Secretary of, uh, of Commerce because she knows how to be economical. And, uh, we made up, we got married, we made up that each one will save five dollars a week, put away for a rainy day. So we did this, we got along the best we can, I made a decent salary. And, uh, in 1929, we saved up about eight hundred dollars, and that was a lot of money then. So then the Depression came and all the banks closed up.

DANE: Did you lose your money?

BERGER: Uh, it took about three years until we got it back, in dribs and drabs. Ten dollars, fifteen dollars. But it, uh, was hard struggling.

DANE: Did you speak English at this point? I mean, how did you learn English?

BERGER: Well, uh, this here, maybe another story, I'll try and make it short. When I came here I wanted to learn, and learn fast. So I got a job in a furniture store.

My job was, the furniture used to come in, by railroad. And some furniture was damaged in transit.

My job was to fix up that furniture, make it ready to deliver to the customer. It was no union there, and I worked for a man, like the average boss, and I told him I have to go to school. I went to evenings, elementary school. I was supposed to work at six, till six o'clock. It came six o'clock I started to wash up and go, he says, you know, you forgot to do something. What's the matter? He says, "There's a bedroom set has to be delivered eight o'clock in the morning, and a piece of furniture, the dresser, came in a with a broken leg." He says, "The truck is loading eight o'clock, you have to fix it up now." So, uh, so I told him, "But I have to go to school."

He says, "You'll make it." So I had to rush through with the job, and I barely made it, I had to be in school seven thirty. So from the store I went straight to school without, without having dinner. And, uh, I tried to, I was being in school from seven thirty to ten thirty, and then, of course, came home and had my dinner. And then, I wanted to learn fast, so I used to sit until one, two o'clock and doing my homework.

DANE: And your wife, too? How was she learning?

BERGER: Well, at that time I wasn't married yet. I got married in 1927.

DANE: All right.

BERGER: This was the time between 1923 and 1927. Well, within a year-and-a-half I graduated elementary school, evening elementary school. Actually it's equal, equal to day school, the fifth grade. And, uh, I had nerve enough to go for high school entrance exam. I tried once. I failed. And then six months I tried again and I made it. So, I made high school, one year high school, and I had to be a dropout, 'cause I wanted to get married, and this is added on additional responsibility, so I had to drop school, but I kept on reading and, uh, I started to read the papers, English papers, New York Times. And, uh, I found out that the best education you can get is just from reading the average newspapers. And then I belonged to the library, I used to take out books, and I was reading a lot. Whatever I made myself, I think I pulled myself out on my own good sense. And, uh . . .

DANE: Did you ever feel, I mean, coming over, not speaking the language, you were almost a grown man, at sixteen, I mean at that time.

BERGER: Yeah, mature.

DANE: Mature. Did you ever, I mean, how were you treated? Did people treat you like you were, an immigrant, i mean, did you ever feel . . .

BERGER: Well, let me put it this way, when you grow up, when you grow up, under that kind of environment, or that atmosphere, where you get that done (he is moved) so you learn to take all this, I mean, you learn to take abuse and, uh, you have to learn to just keep your head above water. The same thing happened, uh, in Depression time. You see, I told you, the bank failed, we didn't have money, and you worked for that furniture store, you used to get, that time I worked myself up to forty-five dollars a week, which was a good salary, but then when the Depression came, and being furniture is more or less a luxury item, so the men didn't do no business at all, so, but, uh, I was a good worker, I was conscientious enough, I knew I come in, I get paid a day's pay, so I used to try to give

him a day's work. So, for that reason he kept me one day a week. And i used to get seven-and-a-half dollars, and that was supposed to last me for the week. Uh, but the thing about it that, I'm a little bit, have a little bit compassion, I'm, uh, I'm considerate, because I noticed, when he gave me that seven-and-a-half dollars pay, a check, he had to date it for two weeks later because the man didn't have the money.

DANE: Oh, no.

BERGER: So, I realized that. And, uh, I also, uh, I worked on the East Side, which is two blocks away from the Bowery, if you heard of the Bowery, New York. That's where all the down and outs are there. And they have their soup kitchens that people come in, some of it are sponsored by the, uh, what is it, the people that go, before Christmas with the . . .

DANE: Oh, Salvation Army.

BERGER: Yeah, they're sponsored by The Salvation Army. And some of that was sponsored by other people. And I used to watch that people, they don't belong on the Bowery. They don't look like the Bowery bum, and

decent people used to stay in the line for a bowl of soup. My own experience was, I worked for that furniture store and that avenue that was Avenue A, it was where mostly furniture stores there, and the next door, uh, was a bigger furniture store than the one I worked for, and there were two brothers. One was, uh, more or less modern, up to date, the other one was old-fashioned. By old-fashioned, I mean, he used to pay his bills on time and try to be an honest businessman. The other one was a little bit on the crooked side. So they were arguing that they can't afford to pay the bills, so, uh, one, the older one, which wanted to go straight. So I remember he used to live in Seagate, which is a very fancy neighborhood in Brooklyn by the beach. He says, "I'm going to sell the house." He had, at that time, was a Packard, I'm going to sell my Packard, I'm going to sell my wife's jewelry first, and try to make a settlement with the creditors. And the other one said I'm not going to sacrifice a penny, we are going to declare ourselves bankruptcy. And I used to come in and every day was the same argument or fights, and the older brother, so he could do nothing, instead of going into bankruptcy, it was a seven story building, he went up and he

jumped out.

DANE: No kidding. Hard times. Oh, tell me, when you were here and you started having your own family and a wife, did you bring any customs from the Ukraine with you and practice them in your home, or was it mostly religion . . .

BERGER: Well, I'll tell you, I believe, no matter how you are, if you're brought up in a decent environment, I mean, a nice family life, so no matter, nothing can change you. You might bend a little bit, you know what I mean, to be more or less modern, but you cannot, get away from it. You see, talking about religion, I was extremely religious, but coming to the United States, so you learn that you have to bend a little bit, for one reason, I'll give you, when I came over, and I started to look for a job, and I came home and told, and told my father that I have to work Saturday. Number one, when I came here, I didn't remember my father. 'Cause when I was, when he left I was two years old. But, see, when you study, especially in the Jewish religion, you have the ten commandments, the fifth commandment is honor thy father and thy mother. And this was knocked into me so much that I

had to practice it. So, i didn't have no love for them, but I respected them. (he is moved) So, they told me, he says, whatever you get paid for Saturday I'll pay you double, but don't work on Saturday. (he is moved) I tried to reason with them, I told them look here, you're a God-fearing man and God usually helps you out, he said, but God didn't help you that much. because we came here, you never worked on the Sabbath, and you were poor as a church mouse, you didn't have a penny to your name, you were sick, if I follow in your footsteps, it will happen to me the same thing. So little by little I won him over. See, that's what I mean, I had to bend a little.

DANE: Mr. Berger, did you come over as Harry Berger, or did you have another name?

BERGER: No. The only thing, it's pronounced different. The only thing, one thing, in Russian, it's pronounced BHER-gur. You see, this is Berger. My first name was, the funny thing about it, I met a friend from Europe, he came over six months ahead of me, so he was dressed like an American boy. So he says, "If you don't want people to look at you funny, first of all, try and get dressed, buy yourself a suit like American

boys wear, and change your name. My name in Europe, in Jewish, is Hershiel. So he says Hershiel's not an American name. Change it to Harry. So I listened to him. (he laughs) I changed it to Harry. Then after a while I found out there was a very well-known actor, Hershiel Bagnatof, did you hear of him?

DANE: Uh-huh.

BERGER: He's not ashamed of his name.

DANE: And that's H-E-R-S-H-E-L?

BERGER: Hershiel? H-E-R-S-H-I-E-L. So, until this very day, I'm sorry I did it. Uh, my sister's name was Ethel, so they also told him that was not an American name, so she changed it to Ida.

DANE: Ida?

BERGER: Yeah.

DANE: How do you spell Ethel?

BERGER: Ethel is like Ethel Merman.

DANE: Oh. To Ida?

BERGER: Yeah. So then, after a while my sister found out a

very well-known, uh, actress' name, Ethel, and they aren't ashamed of it. But once you change you name that's it. And that's how it is.

DANE: Do you remember when you became a citizen?

BERGER: Yeah. First of all applied, uh, uh, about six months after, you have to apply for citizenship. And then you have to wait five years, and that's exactly what I did. Five years later, I became an American citizen.

DANE: When did you feel that you were an American, when you first felt American?

BERGER: Well, uh, I think it took me about a year until I got rid of some European customs and everything else. And you adopt yourself, you know, you don't want, eh, pointed out, as, uh, at that time they used to call 'em my crenam, in other words, they used to give you a nickname. And nobody wanted to be in that category, so, uh, that's what you do.

DANE: Would you change anything, do you regret coming over?

BERGER: No, no. First of all, I'll tell you something, in 1967 my wife and I went for a trip to Europe. We go in Italy, we go in France, and we were in Israel. And

no matter where we went, it can't beat the United States. The standard of living is different, even the thinking of people are different, you see. You start thinking, we went to visit some friends, and there was about six people in the party, and everyone was pulling to a different side, one was a little bent on the socialist side, one a little bit more or less to communist, and, eh, there's no, there's no substitute for the United States.

DANE: I think we're at the end of the tape. Is that it? Perfect ending. This is the end of the interview with Harry Berger. It's 11:25, on October 20, 1985.