

KECK-65/PERLSTEIN

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ANNA PERLSTEIN

BIRTH DATE: APRIL 9, EXACT YEAR UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW DATE: OCTOBER 24, 1985

RUNNING TIME: 22:00

INTERVIEWER: DEBBY DANE

RECORDING ENGINEER: O.J. CONNELL, III

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ARLINGTON, VA

TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1986

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TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

PALESTINE (REFERRED TO AS "ISRAEL," BORN POLAND), 1913

AGE 13

NO SHIP NAME RECALLED

DANE: This is Debby Dane and I'm speaking with Anna Perlstein on Thursday, October 24, 1985. We are beginning the interview at 2:35 PM and we are about to interview Anna Perlstein about her immigration from Poland, uh, in . . .

PERLSTEIN: Uh, from Israel.

DANE: From Israel in about 1913.

PERLSTEIN: I don't know. I couldn't tell.

DANE: This is interview 65. Mrs. Perlstein, can you tell me what day you were born and what town you were born in?

PERLSTEIN: I, I, I am not positive, but I always make it April 9. I was, I think I was born in Poland, Bialystock.

DANE: Do, do you remember what kind of town it was, what it did for what people did for a living?

PERLSTEIN: How would I, I was only five years old when I left. I know my mother wasn't in very good circumstances. My father was in the United States and he sent her a little money whenever he could and then I had an aunt living in Warsaw, that's capital of Poland, and she had one son but he died and they wanted a child in her house and she want, she and her husband, so they came to Paris to, uh, where was I, in Bialystock, and asked my mother if she couldn't have one of the children live with her. So evidently they picked me and I, I lived with them until I went. My parents went to Israel, let me see now, who went to Israel first? No, my, my parents went to the United States. My mother and three other children. I was supposed to go with them too, but she was afraid to tell my father that she's leaving one child so he didn't know about it until we came, until they came to the United States. And I was

left to live in Warsaw, which I liked very much. I went to a good school there. It was Polish we learned, Polish, and I enjoyed living with them, and when my mother came to get me I wouldn't go near her. I will not go and I'm going to stay here and, of course, my aunt and uncle were pleased to have a child in their house, so I remained there. Three days my mother stayed and I wouldn't even speak to her.

DANE: Because she wanted to take you to America?

PERLSTEIN: Yeah, with her family. She was afraid to tell my father that she's leaving one child. So that's how I remained in Warsaw. And then I suppose you don't, I'm sure you don't remember, but you must have read about the pogroms, and they started to kill Jews. So my uncle sold his business and they packed up and went to Israel and I went with them. And . . .

DANE: Do you remember how old you were when you went to Israel? About?

PERLSTEIN: Ah, about nine. I went to school. It's not a school like in the United States, but it was maintained by, uh, uh, a very prominent person, a

banker, I can't think of his name now.

DANE: Not Wattenberg?

PERLSTEIN: No, he, he built up, he had a lot of money. He built up all the colonies there. And we lived in Tatatikua [ph]. That was near Jafa. So there was only a school, there was no high school.

DANE: What language did you speak when you got to Israel?

PERLSTEIN: I spoke, uh, Polish, but I had learned to speak Hebrew there. I could read Hebrew and speak well as all of the children, you know.

DANE: Do you remember why your father went to the United States?

PERLSTEIN: He, he, well, he couldn't make, uh, he couldn't make enough money to, to keep the family, so he went. He had friends in, uh, New York, no, in, in New Jersey. He went there. He got a good job, I guess, and he used to send money to my m until he was saved up enough to take them over. And I was included but I didn't want to go. We were kids, we don't know, we had, I had it good in my aunt's house and I felt that's it. And they were wonderful to me.

DANE: Do you remember people talking about the United States and about what it was like in America? Did you hear any stories?

PERLSTEIN: I didn't, I was too young to be interested but I knew that my parents lived in the United States and I never wanted to go until they started to write to me and ask me to come over and sent the fare. So when they sent the fare one day I got a little mad at my aunt for some reason. I said, "I'm going to America," and I did. And my aunt was very nice about it. She helped me, she, uh, touched me some family who took care of me until we went, reached Paris. There they, they went a different way and I was alone.

DANE: Were you scared?

PERLSTEIN: I didn't know enough to be scared. And I, I had all the tickets where I had to go so I was brought up there and I came to Ellis Island and, uh, I couldn't speak English now but I had it all written out where I'm going, who I was. And after they were through with me, I was standing, I didn't know what to do. There was a bunch of, uh, Italian people standing

and talking and they kept saying, "Paterson, Paterson, Paterson." I spoke a little French. I went over and asked them if they're going to Paterson. They said yes. So I attached myself to them. I never saw a train or a ferry. I would have never made it. And I went where they went and we came to this train, the station. We reached Paterson. After that they, they had to go where they go and I stood there. So a little boy comes over to me, says, "Are you Anna?" I said, "Yes." He picks me out of all, see my mother wasn't home when the telegram came. When he came home from school he saw the telegram so he rushed over to the train and I said, "Yes." He took me by the hand and took me home.

DANE: And who was the boy, was he?

PERLSTEIN: My brother. I had one brother, he was a year younger than I. That's how I came here.

DANE: When you left Israel, did you travel by train to Paris and then to the, to the coast?

PERLSTEIN: No, on the ship.

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DANE: On the ship.

PERLSTEIN: We went on the ship to France. And then we went on, I think, I crossed France, stayed in Paris, and then the other people had to go a different way and I was left. So what happened? When I was left, of course, I have everything written out on paper, I don't, I don't remember what happened after that but I saw this, uh, Italian family standing and talking and mentioning Paterson, so I went where they went.

DANE: Did you get on a boat? Do you remember getting on the boat?

PERLSTEIN: What boat?

DANE: To come across to America from France? Do you remember that trip?

PERLSTEIN: Yeah, there was a ship . . .

DANE: Was it big?

PERLSTEIN: A big ship, yeah. And I went on it and I, I met some people. I didn't know them but they were friendly and I went along with them and when we came to the, uh, to the United States, I had my papers

and everything with me, that clear.

DANE: Did they when you were on the ship did were you down in third class with lots of other people?

PERLSTEIN: Yeah, it wasn't first class, no. Sometimes I didn't have a bed to sleep on. I don't remember how long we went but I came, I followed them, and I came to the end of Paris and then you go on another ship.

DANE: Uh-huh.

PERLSTEIN: But I didn't know. I was only thirteen. So they kept saying, "Paterson, Paterson." I thought I'll stick along with them and we came to Paterson and on the, on the ferry and the train and we came to the train station, that's where my brother came over.

DANE: Did you have lots of suitcases or not very many things?

PERLSTEIN: I had a, a bundle. Oh, I had a suitcase. There were some clothes. They threw it out when I got there. It was, wasn't clothes like you have in the United States. I got my parents dressed me up in new clothes, introduced me to their friends. Uh, I didn't even know what it was all about.

DANE: Were you, do you remember what you thought of it as a child? Was it an adventure or were you just trying to get here?

PERLSTEIN: I, I just wanted to know my parents. I didn't know what America was like and I didn't like it because I didn't know my mother, I didn't know my father, I didn't know the rest of the family and I wanted to go to my aunt and uncle. They were really my real parents, you might say. But you know it cost a lot of money and I just couldn't work it, so I stayed with them, but it wasn't a happy coming home.

DANE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. When you were on Ellis Island, before we go on, do you remember going through medical examinations? I read that they would check your heart and your eyes. Do you remember any of that?

PERLSTEIN: No. I remember they talked about the Statue of Liberty and I, you know they had that statue was taken off for some reason. Then, were going to redo it, but I didn't see it.

DANE: Do you remember if there were lots of people on, on

Ellis Island, or was it confusing, or . . .

PERLSTEIN: Wasn't confusing. There were a lot of people, lots of packages to claim and things, and I didn't have, I had a little bundle, I had it with me. Then I saw that family. They were talking about Paterson. I followed them. And they said I should hang around them, a big, big family. A lot of people. They spoke Italian so I went along where they went until I came to Paterson. And a ferry, you know you've got to cross a ferry, and a train, and I got there, when we got there I just stood there with them. I didn't know where to go. And my brother came over. It was very adventurous, but I didn't think so. I was too young to realize that I should worry.

DANE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

PERLSTEIN: He came and took me home and they threw out my clothes, bought me all new clothes and dressed me. And they showed me off to their friends. I just came from Israel, their fourth child. They, uh . . .

DANE: Did they speak Polish still?

PERLSTEIN: My parents?

DANE: Yeah.

PERLSTEIN: They spoke Jewish, Polish and Jewish.

DANE: Uh-huh.

PERLSTEIN: They came from Warsaw. No, they came from Bialystock. My aunt lived in Warsaw.

DANE: How did you learn how to speak English?

PERLSTEIN: I, uh, started to go to school, but the children were much smaller in my class and they used to laugh at me, you know. So, after a while I decided I'll quit school. I had some private lessons and I learned how to speak. Well, I'm not the best English speaker, but I can get along. Ah, its been a long time. And I learned the English language. It don't take me long to learn languages. I'm not as good as some people but I can manage all right.

DANE: I'll say. I mean, you speak Yiddish and Polish and English?

PERLSTEIN: And I spoke another language, what, what was it? I forgot. I had another language. A little French I

could speak. Yeah. And then I start, I learned how to speak English. It didn't take me long. After I was here, uh, three or four months they had a sale in the department stores in Paterson and I wanted to get a job. So, I had a, a little older sister, she worked in the store, so she, she told me she'd go to ask for a job, what were the answers I should give, and I memorized it and I got the job. And I got acquainted with the girl who was the head of the department. She got three dollars a week. I got four dollars. She was so mad and I couldn't speak English. Then the next day the manager, the floor, the floorwalker takes a girl from him and she writes down everything they need, so he picked on me. I was, must have given a terrible list. But I didn't know the difference. But it was only a short job, you know, just for the, the sale. So they didn't put me out, at least.

DANE: That's lucky.

PERLSTEIN: Yeah.

DANE: Do you remember, did you bring, I mean, were there customs and things from Poland that you brought with

you here?

PERLSTEIN: Like what? Like what?

DANE: Like, like the food, the kind of food you ate, or holidays . . .

PERLSTEIN: I ate everything. It didn't matter to me. My aunt was a good cook. When I came here my mother could cook very well and I ate what they had. I wasn't fussy, as long as I got something to eat.

DANE: And when did you become an American citizen? How did that work?

PERLSTEIN: Well, I was American citizen because my father was an American citizen and all his family were American citizens. I don't now how that works but I, I was naturally an American citizen.

DANE: That's lucky.

PERLSTEIN: Yeah. I liked it here but I, I didn't know the family, you know, they sometimes made fun of me the way I spoke, you know. But after a while I spoke pretty good, good enough to pass and I, I could get a job.

DANE: When did you start feeling like an American? When did you start not feeling like you belonged back in Poland or Israel?

PERLSTEIN: I don't, I don't know really, but I, when I could speak English, I guess.

DANE: And when did you meet your husband? How did that work?

PERLSTEIN: Oh, that was later on. I was in my twenties. My mother was afraid I'd be an old maid. My other two sisters got married young, you know. So she says, "Why don't you find somebody, get married?" So I got married. I wasn't twenty, I was twenty-four. I got married and I had two wonderful sons. I wish I had a picture, but it isn't a picture, it's what they do. They both went through college and they have good jobs. Everything is all right.

DANE: Did you run, what was your business? Didn't you and your husband have a business?

PERLSTEIN: We had a, a store, a clothing and, uh, dry good store, a big store in a small town.

DANE: In New Jersey?

PERLSTEIN: We had several different places. We had one in Patterson, we had one in Boundbrook, we had a nice store in Boundbrook. Uh, yeah we had stores in different places. My husband wasn't a very successful businessman. He didn't understand the business. Like, later on we bought a small store in a smaller town and, you know, the same people come in, they saw the same things. So you have to buy merchandise, not in a big roll, but smaller carts. He was so mad. Every time I think of this, and once, when we needed stuff, he says he'll go and get some goods. I said all right. I thought he'd know. He came back with two rolls of goods with nothing to sell. He was aggravated but I had a little baby, I couldn't go.

DANE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

PERLSTEIN: But, thank God, I have two fine sons. Really that's the best part.

DANE: Would you do it any differently now? Would you have stayed in Israel if you knew what you knew now?

PERLSTEIN: I, I don't know, I, I don't know. I wanted to know

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the parents and the family, but they thought I ought to be right away jump in and be like one of the other children but I, I didn't know them. So, I was a little cool, you know, so I had a lot of trouble.

DANE: Yeah. Was it worth it? Are you glad that you, you came to America?

PERLSTEIN: Oh, yeah, I wanted to know the family. I didn't know them, so . . .

DANE: O.J., can you think of any other area? (break in tape) This is Debby Dane. We're finishing the interview with Anna Perlstein, number 65. It's now three o'clock. It's October 24, 1985.