

KECK-73

HELEN (HELENA) LANSMAN COHEN

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POLAND, 1920

AGE 20

PASSAGE ON *LEOPOLDINA*

RESIDENCE: SUSNOVITZ

US RESIDENCE: WASHINGTON, DC

PORT OF EMBARKATION: LE HAVRE

DANE: This is Debby Dane, and I'm speaking with Helen Cohen on Wednesday, November 13th, 1985. We're beginning the interview at 1:45 PM. We're about to talk to Helen Cohen about her immigration experience from Poland in 1920. She was twenty years old. Helen Cohen, you came from Poland. Do you remember the name of the town and what it, was it a big town, a little town?

COHEN: It was a big town. The name was Susnovitz [ph].

DANE: Could you spell that?

COHEN: Susnovitz. [ph] I can't spell it for you.

DANE: That's okay. Was it a big town, a little town?

COHEN: A big town. It was on the German border, right on the border.

DANE: And your father, what did he do for a living there?

COHEN: He was a tailor.

DANE: And a big family, lots of brothers and sisters, or . . .

COHEN: We were nine children. Two of them died during the First World War, and so we were left seven.

DANE: And at what point did you people start thinking it was time to come to the United States? Had you heard stories about the United States?

COHEN: Well, we had two uncles, my father's brothers. They came here when they were young, young, young men. And right after the World War One they wrote and asked us if he, if we wanted to come to America. So we told them, my father sent a letter and told him we want to come to America. But they couldn't send for the whole family, they just sent for three of us, my father and I and my younger brother, a younger, he was thirteen

years old.

DANE: You were almost twenty years old by then.

COHEN: Yeah.

DANE: Had you grown up thinking that you wanted to go to America?

COHEN: Oh, yes. I was dreaming about it, because I, I was writing to my uncles, I said I wish one day I'll be in America. I was dreaming to come to America.

DANE: What was it that made you want to come?

COHEN: Because we were not treated right in Poland. The Jewish people weren't treated right at all.

DANE: And were you fairly well off, or were you poor in Poland?

COHEN: Well, we had a general store. We made a good living. But during the war we lost everything.

DANE: Did the Germans take it, or was it . . .

COHEN: Germans and the Austrians, you know. They were fighting together. And they came in and they took everything and we didn't buy any more merchandise so

we were really poor. My father take out the machine and start working, because otherwise wasn't in the business.

DANE: At that time, I don't, I've been told that Jewish girls didn't go to school, but Jewish boys did. Had you been to school as a young woman?

COHEN: You couldn't go to school together with the Catholic children. But we, after they left, they gave us an hour to be in school.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And you weren't married at this point.

COHEN: No. I almost was but, I, uh, didn't want to. I wanted to come to America and marry an American. But I didn't. I had to wait three years until my husband came from Russia. I never knew him, but I met him here. (she laughs)

DANE: And he had come from Europe also.

COHEN: Yeah.

DANE: Huh. What did you imagine America would be like?

COHEN: Well, the stories that I heard from my uncle, they

said how wonderful it is, it's free, you can talk, you can talk about your President here, and you can do anything you wanted free and it's wonderful and they gave us such encouragement.

DANE: And then the time came that, did they send you tickets?

COHEN: They did. They sent us three tickets, so we started out to America.

DANE: How did you decide which members of the family would go and which would stay in Poland?

COHEN: Well, my father decided that the oldest and my brother was the younger one that he would have a good opportunity here.

DANE: What time of year was it when you left your home and started out?

COHEN: Well, we, I don't remember exactly, but we traveled, uh, about three weeks, we traveled.

DANE: By train, or foot?

COHEN: By train, by train.

DANE: And where were you going, what port were you going to be leaving from?

COHEN: We went to, uh, to France. We came through France. That's where they sent us the tickets.

DANE: Did anyone, yes, go ahead.

COHEN: They, um, there was, uh, let me see, uh, I think I told you the port.

DANE: Le Havre, was it Le Havre?

COHEN: Yeah.

DANE: Is that what it was? That's what I remember you saying.

COHEN: I said, uh, I remembered when I told you. The ship's name was Leopoldina, the ship, I remember. Havre, yeah. Havre. To Havre. That's right.

DANE: And the boat was Leopoldina?

COHEN: Leopoldina, like Leopold, Leopoldina. I remember the ship.

DANE: Do you remember when you got to Havre, and getting on the boat?

COHEN: We stayed at Paris, we had cousins in Paris. We stayed two weeks in Paris. And from Paris we went to Havre, and from there we took the boat.

DANE: What did you take with you from your home for the journey?

COHEN: What do you mean?

DANE: Did you take a lot of clothes, or books, or just food, or . . .

COHEN: No, no food. We didn't take no food, but we took clothes, whatever we needed we took.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Did you have suitcases, or did you . . .

COHEN: Suitcases.

DANE: Uh-huh. And when you were in Paris, what were you, had you ever been there before?

COHEN: No, that was the first time. And I still remember. My cousins took us over to see things and the, uh, the, what do you call that?

DANE: The Eiffel Tower?

COHEN: The Eiffel Tower, yeah.

DANE: Sounds like it was exciting.

COHEN: It was very exciting.

DANE: When you got on the boat, finally, you got to Havre and you got on the boat, where did you stay? Did you travel in steerage, or third class, on the boat?

COHEN: We were supposed to get the third class, the second class, but we were in the third class because so many people were going to America, because they opened the doors for everybody right after the War. You wouldn't remember that, but somebody has to tell you that.

DANE: That's right.

COHEN: Your parents tell you anything about it, or your grandparents?

DANE: They died when I was young.

COHEN: Oh, is that so? I'm sorry.

DANE: That's why I like doing this, because I learn so much.
At the port, was it crowded at the port as well?

COHEN: Of course. It was very, very crowded.

DANE: And in the, in steerage, do you remember where you stayed, what it looked like, what it smelled like?

COHEN: It was terrible. It was absolutely terrible. We didn't have regular beds, we had those hang beds. That's how we were sleeping. And I was sick the whole time till we stopped in New York. I was very, very sick.

DANE: Did you get out on deck at all, or did you just stay in that bunk?

COHEN: Yeah, I went out on the deck. My father came. He was on the other side. I was on one side, he was on the other side. So he came over to take me on the deck. I said, "Take me on the deck and throw me in the river, in the ocean, because I can't stand it." I was very, very sick. But finally we got here, and we came to Ellis Island, and we couldn't get off the boat because there were so many people in Ellis Island. They didn't had enough room for us. So we had to stay on the boat six days. That was eighteen days on the boat.

DANE: So you didn't touch land even when you were so close to it?

COHEN: No, we couldn't.

DANE: Did they have enough food for you on the boat?

COHEN: They ran out of food. We only had bread and water, that's all we had.

DANE: When you came over, you said your father was on the other side. Did they separate the men and the women?

COHEN: Oh, sure. Of course. They separated. And, um, when we came, finally we got to Ellis Island, and my father sent a telegram to my, to his brothers, to Washington, to come and get us, they never got the telegram. They took the money and they never sent the telegram. We waited and waited and no, no sign of my uncles. So we sent another telegram and, don't you know, they didn't get the second telegram. And nobody came, and we were worried sick. Then they told us, if nobody's going to come and get us off, they're sending us back, they're send us back to Europe. Can you imagine how we felt? My father was crying. He said, my God, what's happening? Why don't they come? They don't want us,

or what? Finally my uncles decided that something is wrong, that he didn't hear from us. So, he had a cousin in New York, so he called that cousin and he says, "Go to Ellis Island and find out what happened to my brother and the children." So he came. It was just Christmas Eve, and we were in a big hall there, listen to a concert. And you know who was in the concert? Caruso! The real Caruso. He was, gave the concert. And it's still ringing in my ears, his voice, really. He was just out of this world. But when my cousin came and he, and he asked for us, so they, on a loudspeaker, you know, they got us out. When we heard somebody's here to take us, oh, we were so excited, we ran out quick and, because my father knew the cousin, he came here to America. And, um, he took us off, took us to his house and fed us, took us to the train and shipped us to Washington. (she sighs) Oh.

DANE: Amazing. Were you absolutely frightened to your bone?
Did you . . .

COHEN: Of course. We didn't know what we were going to do. How are we going to, we don't want to go back. So, well, thank God, finally, we came here, and, uh, my

father got a job, he started working. (she sighs)

DANE: When you came to Ellis Island and got off the boat finally, after those six days of staying in the harbor, do you remember where you went? Did they put you in lines? Did you have medical examinations to go through?

COHEN: Oh, sure.

DANE: Can you describe what that was like?

COHEN: Oh, it was nothing. We were all healthy, and the doctor examined us and he says you're okay, you can go to America.

DANE: Uh-huh. So you were examined in France, too, or in Poland first, or just in Ellis Island?

COHEN: No, no. Just in Ellis Island.

DANE: Did they ask, do you know if they asked your father any questions about how much money he had, or who he was supposed to meet, or . . .

COHEN: I don't remember that. I couldn't tell you. But I don't think they asked too many questions.

DANE: How long did you have to wait for your uncles to finally get in touch with your cousins? How long were you on the Island?

COHEN: We were about ten days.

DANE: And where did you sleep on the Island, in the big room, or a small room?

COHEN: No, they gave us rooms. I slept separate from my father and my brothers, separate. They treated us wonderful, I'll tell you that. Wonderful.

DANE: And food, were you fed?

COHEN: They gave us plenty food, and they gave us, in fact, when I came to Washington, and my uncles and my aunts saw me, they couldn't believe it. I looked so healthy, I looked so wonderful. I didn't have no rouge on, no lipstick or anything.

DANE: So they treated you well.

COHEN: Yeah.

DANE: Do you r if they gave you a number? I talked o other people, and they remember having been tagged with a number on Ellis Island. Do you . . .

COHEN: Oh, yeah, sure. Everybody had a number.

DANE: Did you make friends at all on, or did you keep to yourself? Did you talk with other people?

COHEN: Oh, we talked to other people, but they weren't there too long because the family came. They took them off.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

COHEN: So, they didn't stay very long.

DANE: When you pulled into the New York Harbor, did you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty, or remember . . .

COHEN: Oh, sure. I did. I did. I said, "That's the lady that is greeting us."

DANE: Had you been told about her?

COHEN: No. We didn't know anything about her.

DANE: Did people go to see her on the ship, or was it just you?

COHEN: Yeah, everybody was anxious to see that lady.

DANE: Huh. Any impression on you when you saw her?

COHEN: Oh, sure. Big impression she made on me. That's why I love her. I still love her.

DANE: Tell me about this poem that you've written.

COHEN: Well, I'm telling you, when I saw that she is going to rest I says okay, I'm going to write something about her. So this is it.

DANE: Can you read it to us?

COHEN: You really like that?

DANE: I do. And I would love it if you could read it for us.

COHEN: I'll try it, because my eyes are getting bad. Since last year my eyes got worse. The Statue of Liberty, by Helen Cohen: I am the Statue of Liberty. I am proud to hold my torch high up. To welcome all the newcomers to this wonderful country called America. I am proud to, I am proud to remind you of this. Is it all right when I stop?

DANE: That's okay, because we can edit it. That's okay.

COHEN: I am proud to remind you of all the opportunities that

you have here. I am an old lady, I am very tired, so I am going to rest for a while, but I will return soon with a smile. I hope you will pay more attention to me. I am closer to God, and I pray for all of you. I hope you pray, too, for a better and stronger America that we all love and cherish.

DANE: That's beautiful. Tell me about how you came to think of, of what it means for you, this poem.

COHEN: It means everything. It means that I have freedom here, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of everything. And I am very proud to be here.

DANE: When you were telling me before, you said that, how did you describe your relationship to the Statue of Liberty today?

COHEN: Today, I cherish her, that's all. I think she is, she gives you courage when you come in. She gives you some kind of courage, just gets into you. I don't know.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And did you say that you were, that you were the Statue of Liberty?

COHEN: Yeah. I just described myself, that I am the Statue

of Liberty, and I would do the same thing that I wrote here.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. That's wonderful. That's so beautiful.

COHEN: Because I do, I tell you, and I go down to pray every Saturday, we have a synagogue downstairs. We pray for this country, we pray for the President, and we pray for freedom, and we pray for peace.

DANE: It's important. Things that you probably couldn't do in Poland. Once you left Ellis Island, you came down to Washington, to your uncle's. How did you start speaking English? Did you speak Yiddish or Polish or Hebrew, or . . .

COHEN: Polish and Yiddish, and some German.

DANE: How did you learn English? Because you were twenty years old by then.

COHEN: I went to night school and I studied very hard. The teachers were really amazed that I learned so quick.

DANE: Was it difficult for you?

COHEN: No. No problem, no problem.

DANE: And when you were down in Washington, did you find that you were treated any differently as a, as a person from Poland?

COHEN: No, they treated me wonderful. When I went to work they were wonderful to me. I was just crazy about everybody.

DANE: So was it like you had imagined in Poland, coming . . .

COHEN: That's right.

DANE: No disappointments.

COHEN: No.

DANE: At what point did you get, are you an American citizen now?

COHEN: Of course.

DANE: What, how did you get your citizenship?

COHEN: I went to night school and learned (?), I learned everything that they have to learn to become a citizen.

DANE: Then did you take a test?

COHEN: Of course.

DANE: And do you remember the day that they made you a citizen? Was it a special occasion?

COHEN: That I don't remember, really.

DANE: When did the rest, did the rest of your family, were they allowed to come over eventually, or . . .

COHEN: Well, I didn't finish, I started my story. When my father was here two years and we saved every penny that we could. And he went back to Europe to bring the rest of the family. So when he got there he got very sick, he got typhoid fever. And then when he got better he had a relapse and he had, after typhoid fever they get, they get spotted fever. And he couldn't come back. He couldn't come back until we became citizens. So when I become citizen, I had to be here five years to become citizen, and had to wait until my brothers become citizens, and we sent for them. So we had the papers ready and everything, and they had the papers ready to come. My mother passed away suddenly. She had a heart attack and she passed away. So he waited another year and then he came over

with two sisters. The rest of them, one of them got married, and one couldn't pass the, uh, the exams. They ask him such questions that my brother said, "That's the silliest question you asked me." They says, "You're staying here, you're not going to America." And my sister, one of my sisters, they asked her, "How many stars is there in, in the sky?" She was thinking a little bit and she says, "Well, bring them down and I'll count it for you." So they were smart. He said, "Okay, you pass." My other sister passed. So only the two of them came with my father.

DANE: Huh. And that was, probably about 1925 or '26 or something?

COHEN: 1926, '27, something. I don't remember exactly what year.

DANE: So by the time he wanted to come back they started having stiff quotas.

COHEN: That's right. That's why, they changed the quotas. That's why he couldn't come right back. But after we become citizens we sent for them and they, they could come.

DANE: Huh. How did you make a living here? Did you have to go to work right away here in Washington? Did your uncle find work for you, or . . .

COHEN: Well, my father found right away, because he was a good tailor. He got a job right away. And I got myself a job in a hat store selling hats. And my brother was working, he started working in Lansberg's Department Store. You remember Lansberg's, they went out of business.

DANE: A big store?

COHEN: Big store. Not one. They had stores all over. So, uh, and they, he had talent. He went to school, he went over to the board and made all kinds of pictures. And they saw that he has a lot of talent. So they called one of the organizations and they came and took him to Corcoran Art Gallery, and he learned and he became an artist.

DANE: No kidding.

COHEN: Yeah.

DANE: He supported himself with his art.

COHEN: Yeah. He supported himself and sent money to support the family, too.

DANE: That's amazing. What a good story.

COHEN: Yeah.

DANE: And working in the hat . . .

COHEN: Still, he's in Florida. He painted my picture.

DANE: That's you?

COHEN: Yeah. It was. It was me. (she laughs)

DANE: Beautiful. Is that when you came here?

COHEN: No. That was in 1941.

DANE: Wow, what a beautiful, that's gorgeous.

COHEN: That's my great-granddaughter. He painted her, too.

DANE: So, as a woman that beautiful, did you start meeting American men and try to fulfill your dream of marrying an American?

COHEN: Yeah. I couldn't find anybody that would want a greenhorn. (she laughs)

DANE: Is that what you were called?

COHEN: So, um, well, I went out with boys, but I didn't care for them, so, that's it. And two years later, my husband came from Europe, from Russia, and I used to, I used to buy in this grocery store. I kept house for myself and my brother. So one day I came in and there was a new boy working. I didn't pay no attention. But he paid attention to me, and he wanted to meet me, so he asked the, he's, uh, you know, the people that he worked for, he said, "Who is this? Is she married? Is she single?" They told him that I'm single and I'm keeping house with my brother. So he wanted a date. I didn't want to give him a date. (she laughs) But he went after me. I couldn't get rid of him, so I married him.

DANE: (they laugh) That's wonderful. And did he speak Polish too, or did you . . .

COHEN: Russian.

DANE: How did you talk to each other? English?

COHEN: English.

DANE: Yiddish?

COHEN: And Yiddish. He learned quick, too. He learned very quickly. And that's it. Then I got married and I had twin daughters.

DANE: Identical twins?

COHEN: No, they're not, but they're very close.

DANE: Did you ever go back to Poland?

COHEN: No.

DANE: Any desire to?

COHEN: No.

DANE: How come?

COHEN: I don't have anybody there any more. My whole family was killed by Hitler. My sister, my brother, my family, uncles and aunts. I left about forty of my family.

DANE: It was lucky that you were here.

COHEN: Yeah. So, what else can I tell you?

COHEN: Well, let me think if there's any, um, this is always a hard one, because people can never think of any

specific customs that they brought from the country they came from. Can you think of any customs? I remember I used to stay in a Norwegian town, and there they celebrated, it was in the States, but they celebrated Swedish Independence Day, from Sweden, and they brought clothes, and everyone would dress up in Norwegian clothes. So those are examples of customs that they brought. Did you bring anything from Poland, your family, was there anything . . .

COHEN: No.

DANE: Did you feel like you'd ended your tie with Poland when you came in?

COHEN: That's right.

DANE: No more. Nothing to do with it.

COHEN: No.

DANE: Let me check my list. A lot of times people . . .

COHEN: Tired? Why don't you sit down on the chair?

DANE: Do you remember if your, if your name was changed when you came from Poland?

COHEN: No. My name wasn't changed. Our name was Lansman, and that's what it is. But a lot of people changed. My husband's name was Cardnovello. And he changed, his brother came first, and he changed to Cohen.

DANE: And was your name Helen in Poland also?

COHEN: Helena.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And were there any things that were absolutely new to you, new foods, things you had never seen before, when you came on the journey from Poland?

COHEN: Well, it was new. Everything was new. But I got used to it very quickly. Like, I got used to it when I came to the house.

DANE: It's an adjustment.

COHEN: That's right.

DANE: And bananas, had you seen bananas before?

COHEN: We had bananas in Poland.

DANE: Oh, you did.

COHEN: We had bananas, we had, uh, cauliflower, we had almost about the same.

KECK-73/COHEN

DANE: Uh-huh. And tomatoes, some people say . . .

COHEN: Tomatoes.

DANE: So nothing was new for you.

COHEN: No, most things were nothing new.

DANE: So I think that's it. We were just talking about greenhorns. How would you use it among yourself? What did it mean?

COHEN: That means you're a newcomer. You're green. You don't know where to go or what to do. You know, you're just green in this town, this country, and that's it.

DANE: But would people call you greenhorn on the street?

COHEN: No, no. (she laughs) When we'd get together, they'd say, "Oh, you're a greenhorn, you don't know yet." (she laughs) It's just funny. That's all.

DANE: This is the end of side one of Helen Cohen, number 073.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DANE: This is side two, beginning, of Helen Cohen, number 073. It's 2:15. We were just talking again that, it worked out so well for you. Do you remember when you first wanted to come to America?

COHEN: When I was about ten years old I said, "I have to go to America." Because my uncles were here already, and it kind of, uh, got me that I want to go to America, too. Yes, I was always dreaming of America. And I was dreaming, and my dream came true. When I came here, I was in a different world. It was so peaceful. It was, oh, those days. In 1920 it was so wonderful here. It was quiet. You were not afraid to go out in the middle of the night. You were not afraid. The doors were open. Where I lived with my landlady, she kept the doors open. I said, "Aren't you afraid?" She says, "You don't have to be afraid here. The doors can be open." It was so free it was, I'm telling you, I was in a different world.

DANE: Did you imagine that it would be that good/

COHEN: Yeah. I imagined. My dream came true.

DANE: That's amazing. You were telling me that there's a

song that you had about green, or being green.

COHEN: Yeah.

DANE: Tell me what the song . . .

COHEN: The green cousin. Like, a green cousin came to me,
she was beautiful. Her cheeks were red like oranges.
I'm gonna sing it in Yiddish. You want me to sing
it?

DANE: Please.

COHEN: (sings in Yiddish) Excuse me. Is that an
interruption, when I cough? (she continues singing)

DANE: That's beautiful. I know it's too long to translate
all of it, but what, tell me . . .

COHEN: See, when she came over she was beautiful. Her cheeks
were like roses, like oranges. And her hair was
blonde and her eyes were blue. She was beautiful.
Her teeth were like pearls. And when she, she came to
me, and I introduced her to my, to a lady who had a
millinery shop, and she gave her a job. She worked.
But she found herself a boyfriend, and he took her pay
away. He was mean. He took her pay away. And so she

suffered. She loved him, and she suffered. And after I met her, a few years later she looked droopy, and her eyes weren't so blue any more, and, uh, she said, "I am so sorry. I wish Columbus wouldn't discover America." (she laughs)

DANE: Is that the end?

COHEN: Yeah.

DANE: Oh, it's a sad song.

COHEN: Yeah, it's sad.

DANE: Did you write it, or was it something that everybody . . .

COHEN: No, everybody would sing it when I came over here.

DANE: Uh-huh. Oh, isn't that wonderful? Were there other songs, too, that you remember that related to newcomers and the experience of being here?

COHEN: No, I don't remember, really.

DANE: When would you sing this song? When everyone was together at night?

COHEN: Yeah. When we were together we would sing it.

DANE: It sounds like a great song to sing with a lot of people.

COHEN: Yeah.

DANE: And you worked in a hat store, too.

COHEN: Sure.

DANE: But you weren't the woman in the song.

COHEN: I don't know. I don't think so, because I'm always happy. I don't let myself be sad no matter how sad I am. I have plenty of troubles.

DANE: I think that's about it. Tell me, when did you first feel like you were an American?

COHEN: When I became a citizen. Then I was really happy. Now I'm a citizen of America, and I was so happy, really. I was the happiest girl.

DANE: It really was a dream come true. And it meant, tell me one more time, what did it mean for you at that time? Because you were twenty-five then. You were an adult.

COHEN: Yeah, sure. I was a big girl.

DANE: What did it mean to be an American?

COHEN: It means a whole lot. It means you're free. You're . . . You see, when you're in Europe, you can't talk about your government, you can't talk about your, uh, President, God forbid. They'll kill you if you talk about your president in Europe. (she sighs) I'm free. I'm just like a bird. You can fly and land on any tree, and you're free.

DANE: That's good. This is the end of side two, interview with Helen Cohen, number 73. It is now 2:25.