

KECK-74/WILENSKY

KECK-74

TOBA (YONA) MILLER (MENOLINKOV) WILENSKY
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PALESTINE, 1912
AGE 8
PASSAGE ON "THE ALICE"

DANE: This is Debby Dane, and I'm speaking with Toba wilensky on Wednesday, November 13, 1985. We're beginning the interview at 3:45. We're here to interview Toba Wilensky about her immigration experience from Palestine in 1912. She was eight years old. Toba, may I call you Toba, or shall I call you Mrs. Wilensky?

WILENSKY: Toba's all right.

DANE: Where were you born? What's the name of the town?

WILENSKY: Well, frankly I don't know if it was Jerusalem or Jaffa. It was one of those towns in Palestine. I

really don't know where.

DANE: And you grew up, until you were eight, in Palestine.

WILENSKY: That's right.

DANE: What did it look like? Do you remember if it was desert, or if it was trees, or . . .

WILENSKY: Well, it wasn't desert in the big cities but, of course, since, uh, my father had jobs out in the small Arab countries or sections, well, that was desert. They rode on camels, they rode on donkeys, and it was really way out from civilization.

DANE: Did you ever ride on a camel?

WILENSKY: Yes, I did. I rode on a camel for holidays. We used to go to my mother's parents, who lived in, uh, I think it was Brair, or, you hear those names now, even. They're still in existence. I don't remember just which little town they lived in. And we used to go there for holidays. And, uh, so our mode of transportation was on a camel. My sister and I would sit on each side of the hump, and on top was a crate of chickens that they were carrying to them. (she laughs) And coming back, they left us there for the

time being, thinking we'd go to school. 'Cause in this little town where we lived there were no schools. And so, uh, they left us there and I don't know how they got back. On a camel, I guess. (she laughs)

DANE: Uh-huh. Did your, your mother was Russian, though, wasn't she?

WILENSKY: She came from Russia, yes.

DANE: Do you know how it was that, and was your father from Russia also?

WILENSKY: Yes, he was from Russia but, uh, I don't know whether in the same town or another one or what. See, the thing is, there's about, my mother died in Palestine when she was a year old, when I was a year old. And, uh, then, like, I don't know when, a few years later, he met this one, that I call Mother or Mom, you know. So where exactly she came from I don't know. Uh, I remember hearing her mention Russian countries. Katrinaslov and, uh, some other places, you know, that are towns in Russia. But, uh, she came by herself at one time, and then he later met her.

DANE: Do you happen to know how it was that your father came to move to Palestine?

WILENSKY: Well, I know he had been in the Army, the Russian Army, so I don't think he was trying to evade what they had as the draft. They used to draft all of the young men. Why he came to Palestine, specifically, I really don't know. And why she came I don't know either. Except it was called the Halnzen, I mean, the people who came and started inhabiting, it was just beginning, although it was under British rule, you know, from the Balfor Declaration. Um, it was under British rule, but the same time the Jews still liked to go there, to what they considered their homeland. And, um, so they were building, and draining ditches, and it was full of mosquitoes and all kinds of, uh, epidemics. So I guess they were patriotic and, uh, they each went there to, to help, to be among the original pioneers. As I said, this is American pioneers. (she laughs)

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

WILENSKY: But, uh, they probably had the pioneer spirit to go over there. They were both young and, uh, they were

among the first, I think, to get there. And it must have been, if we left there in 1912 it must have been around 1900. I was born 1904. So they must have gotten there about the turn of the century.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And you were a Jewish family. Do you remember what the relations were like between the Arabs and your family?

WILENSKY: Well, as I say, since I was young and didn't understand much, I think early on I don't remember any trouble. But as I grew older I know the Arabs used to chase me down the street, or something like that. And, uh, at one time one Arab attacked my father. And we had an Arab servant who interfered and took care of him. But things were starting to get, uh, a little hectic, I think, and it was around 1912, maybe, they were talking about it in 1911, and, uh, it looked like the war might start in Europe. So since my mother had her whole family here they decided to get out and go to America.

DANE: Uh-huh. Do you know if your father ever was afraid in his business, or if he . . .

WILENSKY: Well, maybe after he was attacked, you know. Up

until then, I don't know of anything. But, uh, he had a mill. He didn't have a mill, he was working for somebody who had the mill. And he used to grind the grain and so forth that the Arabs would bring to them. And that's how we'd see them coming and going.

And, uh, attached to that house and mill was a big swimming pool, and the Arabs used to come every evening and take a dip in it, and then they'd pray. We used to watch that, you know, watch them doing, like they do their evening prayers, you know. So, uh, now our servant's name, I remember, was Ibrahim, which is an Arab name and, um, I think his wife worked for us, too, because I remember seeing her bake bread. (she laughs) She used to bake that flat pita, you know, that they, and, uh, she had a, a round oven, like, sunk in the ground, and she would bake there.

DANE: It sounds like you had it pretty well off in Palestine. Were you a poor family, or . . .

WILENSKY: Well, I don't know what poor was over there, you know. Uh, uh, I can't say. I don't know what our circumstances were. I think, I think as you can see by the pictures that we were dressed nicely. And,

um, Mama grew a garden and so forth, we had a big yard with a garden. But what our actual circumstances were I wouldn't know.

DANE: I see your father has a fez on.

WILENSKY: Yes. Well, I don't think he wore it all the time, but maybe for this picture. He just, to show a little of Palestine he dressed up like that.

DANE: Where were your mother's relatives?

WILENSKY: Well, uh, a lot of her sisters, she had about four or five sisters, uh, and the two brothers, the two younger brothers were in Palestine with their father and mother. And her other sisters had come to America and she had two brothers in Africa. (she laughs) I've got a picture of the man from Africa, too, when they came here on a visit.

DANE: Had the sisters settled in Baltimore?

WILENSKY: They were all in Baltimore, yes. They were all in Baltimore. And so that's where, what our destination was when we left to come to America, was to come and, uh, live there.

DANE: Had they talked about it for a long time, coming to America, or was it a . . .

WILENSKY: I couldn't tell you that. I really don't know.

DANE: Did they tell you stories? Had you any mental [picture of what it was going to be like?

WILENSKY: I didn't even know what a was, you know. (she laughs) I don't, I don't recall anything. All I know is that we were going to go someplace, and I didn't know where.

DANE: And did you know you were leaving Palestine forever?

WILENSKY: Well, probably at the time I did. Yes, I suppose so. But, uh, I don't think it affected me to any degree because, uh, living in these little towns we didn't really have friends, you know. We had nobody, so we didn't feel as if we were leaving anybody.

DANE: Uh-huh. And then the journey started, and you were leaving to come over here.

WILENSKY: Uh-huh.

DANE: Where did you, describe how and where you went.

WILENSKY: Well, I don't remember. We got, getting on the boat, and, uh, of course, we were in steerage where all the other poor passengers were, and I know we got off someplace and I don't remember if it was some place in Greece, which is probably along that route, and the name of the ship was Alice. That I know, because I saw it on papers. I couldn't find them. But I saw that the name of the ship was Alice. And, uh, it took us about three or four weeks, as far as I remember, to talk about it. And then we landed at Ellis Island.

DANE: On the trip over, do you remember what you were fed?

WILENSKY: I don't remember anything but spaghetti. I know it was bloody red looking and terrible, but that I remember. Whatever else was served I don't know.

DANE: Would they bring food to you, or did you go to a cafeteria?

WILENSKY: I think they brought it. I think they brought it to us. They brought it down to us. And every once in a while we'd go and look up at the upper decks, you know, the better class of travelers. And, uh, I didn't understand too much about it then, you know.

But, uh, once, once we did have a drill, uh, and we all had to put on lifejackets and go up on deck for a while and, from what I remember, there was talk of the ship sinking, or whatever. So, uh, I don't know.

DANE: And at the time, you'd thought at one point that it was the Titanic sinking.

WILENSKY: Well, I thought, later in life, you know. At that time I didn't think anything. But later in life, when I knew about the Titanic, I thought maybe that's what inspired them to hold the drill. But then, I think the dates don't match because, uh, I don't know if the naturalization certificate says when, I don't think so, because that must have been about, you'd have to be here six years, I think, to apply for citizenship, so I don't think it was anything in there about that.

DANE: Uh-huh. And they got you all up on deck?

WILENSKY: They got us all up on deck with lifejackets and we stood there and looked out. First time we saw the open sea because down in the, you know, in the steerage, there was nothing you could, no windows you could look out. It's pitiful, it's poor.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

WILENSKY: But, you know, the foreigners, the people who were on board, felt that they were going to the promised land, so they were happy. They were singing and dancing and, uh, making the best of whatever was there.

DANE: And you came over with your two uncles.

WILENSKY: Two uncles, I don't remember if there was an aunt or not, but I know an aunt came over. Whether it was with us, I don't remember. But the two uncles I remember, because they were young men. They were about sixteen and eighteen, or something like that.

DANE: And that was your mother's brother.

WILENSKY: They were my mother's brothers.

DANE: And did they play instruments on the boat?

WILENSKY: Yes, they did. They played mandolins and, what was the other thing?

WILENSKY: Balalaikas?

WILENSKY: Balalaikas, and whatever they had. And they sand

their home songs. Of course, everybody, I don't think everybody was from Palestine, at the time. The boat probably, when it stopped at that port, wherever it was, um, they probably picked up passengers there, maybe from Greece. So there were all kinds. And, uh, when they weren't seasick they, (she laughs) they enjoyed whatever they could.

DANE: Would people sing along with them, do you remember, or . . .

WILENSKY: I don't remember that. I suppose those who knew the song did, or whatever. I don't remember too much about that trip, really.

DANE: Uh-huh. The balalaika, I remember seeing it in movies. Do you remember what it looked like?

WILENSKY: Well, it's, it looks, it's a stringed instrument and, uh, I think with a kind of, you know, you can't show that on the tape, but, uh, it looks somewhat like a, maybe a ukelele with a fat belly. (she laughs) Or something like that.

DANE: And did you sing songs also? Did you understand their songs?

WILENSKY: Oh, I don't know. I don't remember. I have a voice like a crow. (she laughs) I don't know. But, as a child, I didn't know it, so maybe I sang along. Who knows.

DANE: I remember you told me a story about, um, one of the officers.

WILENSKY: Yes . Well, one of the officers came down, looked around, and, uh, I guess I looked a little peppier than the others. And he picked me up and took me up to the upper deck and, uh, gave me something to eat, and gave me something to take down with me, and, uh, so, I was just a little different. My poor sister was not doing very well on that trip. She was sick most of the time.

DANE: Do you remember, were you excited to go up above and see what it looked like up on the other deck?

WILENSKY: Well, I suppose, but I guess I didn't know the difference too much. You know, you only know what you know, and I guess I came down and told them what I'd seen, and, um, brought some fruit down with me which we hadn't, we never got so, uh, it was an experience. (she laughs)

DANE: Do you remember at all what it looked like where you slept? Did you sleep with your father?

WILENSKY: I think we slept right on the floor, right on the floor of that, oh, deck. And, uh, whether we had bedding, or anything like that, I really don't remember. I guess we made the best of what we had.

DANE: And it was almost three or four weeks on the floor?

WILENSKY: As far as I remember they were saying that it took that long to get over there.

DANE: And you finally got into New York . . .

WILENSKY: We got into New York and, I guess, into Ellis Island and, uh, that's where the examinations began. And, um, people were lined up. And, uh, when they, the man looked into my eyes, examined my eyes, he put me to one side, he pushed me to aside and, uh, I think my father and mother must have known right away that it was something wrong there, but he let them go by and I didn't know what was happening until another man came along and took me by the hand and started walking with me and I kept looking back to see if they were coming with me, but they weren't. So, uh,

he took me and, uh . . .

DANE: Were you afraid?

WILENSKY: Oh, I was crying. (she laughs) Of course, I was afraid. I didn't know where I was going and they weren't going with me. I didn't know what was happening.

DANE: Did you scream to them?

WILENSKY: I guess I did. (she laughs) And they just stood there and they cried, too, because they knew what was going to happen. The people, you know, most of these foreigners coming across, they know what the examinations are and what will hold them up and so forth, so they were quite well aware of what the trouble might be when they looked in my eyes and put me aside. Which I later learned, I was told, that he had said I had trachoma, which is a highly contagious eye disease that most people have in the tropical countries, in the warm countries. So he took me to a place which was a hospital and, uh, where there were all other kinds of people speaking all the different languages and, um, there I got treatment. Every day I'd go and get drops in my eyes. That I remember.

DANE: Did you spend the night in the hospital rooms with the patients?

WILENSKY: No, we had beds. As I remember we each had beds. I slept in the bed. And I think they gave us a uniform to wear, took our clothes and gave us a uniform to wear. And, uh, we'd get our three meals a day, whatever they were, I don't remember, except oatmeal for breakfast. And, uh, how long I was there I really don't know. And unfortunately the people are all gone and I can't ask anybody.

DANE: But it was more than a couple days that you didn't see your family?

WILENSKY: Oh, yes, I'm sure it was more than a couple days because I know my sister had already started school, had gotten to Baltimore and started school by then and then the next thing I knew, however long that was, they came and brought me my clothes and told me that I was to go. And, uh, they took me into a courtroom where a man was standing, and the judge was asking me questions to identify if this man was really the relative he said he was, you know.

DANE: Who had come to get you.

WILENSKY: Who had come to get me from Baltimore. He was one from Baltimore. I didn't know him, and so I didn't know who he was. But, uh, after we answered questions that matched, uh, then they let us go.

DANE: Do you remember what some of the questions were?

WILENSKY: Well, they asked me what my grandfather's name, and I remembered that, and I said, "Henry," or Henne, in Jewish. And they said, "What's your grandmother's name, but I forget what it was, and I said, "Peshe, Peshe..." And the man spoke up and said, "Liebe?" And I said, "Oh, yeah. Peshe Liebe. That's her name." So that showed that he knew and he was the right man.

DANE: Wow. So you left that day.

WILENSKY: So we left and, uh, I remember he took me, I remember going on the subway. But first he took me to a little stand and bought me some candy and I ate some and I put some away for my sister. I said, "This I'll save for my sister." I remember that. And, uh, we got to Baltimore. He took me first to his home

and my folks were staying with another, with another sister of my mother's, another aunt. They had apparently room for the four of us, which was supposed to be temporary, and it was, until they could find a place of their own.

DANE: When you were, I don't want to leave Ellis Island too quickly, because I . . .

WILENSKY: Pardon me?

DANE: I don't want to leave Ellis Island too quickly. Go back, when you had the medical exam, did they turn up your eyelids?

WILENSKY: Uh-huh. He turned up my eyelids and that's all he did. And recognized, thought he recognized, the trachoma.

DANE: Do you know, have you ever learned what the symptoms are, what it looks like, how can they tell?

WILENSKY: Well, I don't know. But the optometrist here told me that it leaves a sort of a ground look on the inner lid. And they said I don't have it. So all the optometrists that I've ever talked to said I never had it. I never had it.

DANE: When you were on Ellis Island, did you think about your parents every day? I mean, do you remember being . . .

WILENSKY: I don't remember, but I'm kind of a happy-go-lucky person and, especially as a child, I guess. Uh, I take things as they come and, uh, I don't remember. I must have missed them. I think I cried every night when I went to bed. But, uh, I didn't know what was happening, or . . .

DANE: Did you see them after you were taken from the lines? Did they ever . . .

WILENSKY: Well, one time my mother came to the hospital. Apparently that must have been what they decided to let them go, go on to Baltimore. And she just came to see me and talk to me and that was the last time I saw her.

DANE: Did they ever say, you sound like you were too young, at age eight, why you weren't sent back?

WILENSKY: Well, at the time I didn't know, of course. All I know is that we came . . . But later, as we grew up, I heard that one of the, uh, relatives who, who was I

guess quite well-to-do in Baltimore and knew politicians, had gone to see a Congressman about it and, uh, somehow or other they didn't send me back.

DANE: You told me, that's a lucky thing. You told me a wonderful story about, um, it was cold when you got here, it was in December, and you had come from Palestine, where it was warm.

WILENSKY: Yes. I had no winter clothing, of course.

DANE: This is on the island?

WILENSKY: On the island. And, uh, I think it was called Castle Garden, maybe the hospital part of it, or whatever. And some children were playing out of doors, and it was very pretty out of doors. And, uh, so I wanted to go, too, and they wouldn't let me. I said, as I say, either we spoke through an interpreter or somebody knew my language, but I did understand that they said I had to have a sweater to go out. And, I didn't know what a sweater was. And when my mother came I said, "I need a sweater." And she says, "What's a sweater?" I said, "I don't know, but they won't let me go outside to play without it." (they laugh) Well, too bad. She didn't know what to

do. But, as I recall, eventually, I got out there. Maybe they loaned me one, I don't know. But I did get out there and play with the other children.

(she laughs)

DANE: Do you remember, it sounds like you made friends then.

WILENSKY: I suppose so. I think, as I recall, there was an Arabian child there and, uh, I know we were friends. I probably had a smattering of Hebrew, well, Hebrew I spoke. I probably had a little smattering of Jewish, some of Arabic, you know, and, uh, with children you don't really need much talk. You know, you make yourself understood.

DANE: Did it seem like a big place? Were you allowed to run around, remember?

WILENSKY: As I recall, yes. It was a fairly large place. The dining room was pretty large, and we'd get our three meals a day. (she laughs) Uh, and the only way we knew that it was time to eat was a girl would come out and clap her hands and holler, "Manga!" And we'd all run for manga. I've since learned that manga is the Italian word for eating. So whatever it was, all

languages understood it. And, uh, we'd get our meals. I suppose I did all right, you know. When I got to Baltimore I don't recall my parents saying anything about how bad I looked or anything like that. I was always cheerful, I guess.

DANE: Uh-huh. And the woman who used to clap her hands and say, "Manga." Do you still do that, ever? Does it remind you of, whenever you heard it?

WILENSKY: Well, after I got married I used to do that to the family. When dinner was ready I'd come in and clap and say, "Manga." And, of course, I only had a daughter and a husband, but they'd know what it meant. Today you say, manga to my daughter and she'll laugh. Because she'll know what I was talking about.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

WILENSKY: That stayed with me.

DANE: That's so wonderful. The other thing that they did to a lot of people when they came in, to keep track, was to give them name tags. Do you remember . . .

WILENSKY: I don't remember. Probably, in the hospital, I may

have worn one, but I don't remember.

DANE: And we didn't talk about the Statue of Liberty. Did you see it?

WILENSKY: I don't think so. No, I don't think I saw it. Because, when we came in, we were in steerage, as I say, we didn't see anything. And then, leaving, I left with my uncle through another way, I guess we weren't on the water any more, so I didn't know anything about it.

DANE: When it was time to go and your uncle came to get you, were you excited or did you, had you made friends? Did you . . .

WILENSKY: I really don't remember. It's practically a blank to me, you know, most of it. It's just a blank to me. I did what I was told and, but I did ask him, "Are you my father?" Because I don't know. I thought, well, when you come to America you change. And, uh, I didn't recognize him and he laughed and he said, "No, I'm your uncle." So, but, uh, my sister was already waiting for me when I came, and we came up to his house and he had a daughter two years old and a son a little older, about six, and they didn't pay

any attention to me at all. (she laughs)

DANE: When you, um . . .

WILENSKY: Will you excuse me? (break in tape)

DANE: Toba, tell me about your father's name when he came over, and what it was before that?

WILENSKY: Well, in Russia and in Palestine his name was Menolinkov. And, uh, when we came over here, this shows Miller already, doesn't it. Yeah, because when they came over, whoever asked him what their name was and they said Menolinkov, well, they just threw up their hands. They couldn't spell it. So they asked him what did he do for a living and he said he milled grain, you know, he was a miller. So we got the name Miller. So, from then on, of course, we were Miller.

DANE: And was his name Aaron over there?

WILENSKY: His name was Aaron, yes. Well, actually, he had Samuel Aaron, you know, he had two names. But he was always called Aaron. So, uh, that's what it stayed. He never shows it as Samuel anywhere.

DANE: Do you remember him ever talking about that, about

giving up the name?

WILENSKY: No, he, well, he never talked to us about much of anything unless we thought to ask. But, uh, he wasn't getting to talking too much about those things. Not in our presence anyway.

DANE: And what was, what is your full name, when you, your unmarried name, your maiden name?

WILENSKY: Well, my maiden name was, you mean the Jewish name, was Yona, which is Hebrew for dove. And from Yona the Jewish is Tiber, or Tibul, whatever. Tibul, I guess, a little of a nickname. But Tiber, and so when I started school and they asked what was my name, and I think my sister was the one that took me so she said, Tibul," and from that they made Toba, so I became Toba.

DANE: Toba Miller?

WILENSKY: Toba Miller.

DANE: Did you have a middle name?

WILENSKY: Well, I did, but I never used it. I had a middle name, Hilda. Toba Hilda. But I never used the

Hilda. See, we've always named for dead relatives, so I don't know who the Hilda was for, or who the Toba was for. But I never used Hilda. And then when I came here and went in the civil service, or even before that, I took as a middle name my maiden name.

So I'm Toba M., for Miller. Toba Miller. Wilensky. Then, when I got married I became Toba M. Wilensky.

DANE: That's great.

WILENSKY: And my husband was born in New York, so he didn't have any of this foolishness.

DANE: This is the end of side one, Toba Wilensky, number 074. It's now 4:20.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DANE: This is the beginning of side two with Toba Wilensky, number 074. One question, going back to Ellis Island and the medical exam, were they very strict with you?

WILENSKY: Well, I think they must have been thorough and, uh, I, I, being a prankster child, I had cut my hair so half a bang was hanging over my forehead. And the examiner, a man, lifted it up to see if I was hiding

anything under that hair. Of course, I wasn't and they let it pass.

DANE: Were they checking for lice and sores?

WILENSKY: I believe so. Yes. As I say, he didn't do a whole lot more checking with me when he saw my eyes. After that he just, you know, he knew I wasn't going to get in. So he didn't do anything more than that. That's all he did with me.

DANE: And then you were led away. I remember you said that you were really screaming.

WILENSKY: I was screaming, and I was going like this, you know, like this, put it on the thing. I kept motioning to my parents to come with me to follow me, but they were just sitting there crying because they knew what the score was.

DANE: And your little sister?

WILENSKY: My sister, I don't know. I don't remember what she did.

DANE: Older sister.

WILENSKY: Older, yeah.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Now, going back a little further along the way. You didn't speak English when you came here?

WILENSKY: Oh, of course not. I didn't know what English was. I didn't know anything about this country at all.

DANE: When you got to Baltimore, how did you start learning? Did you go right into school, or . . .

WILENSKY: Well, I went, uh, into, uh, first grade that must have had a teacher. There's a, that was a big year for immigration. And she must have been a multi-lingual teacher because she had this group of children of all countries and she must have had a way that, uh, she taught us, we learned. And the advantage of that is that you learn the correct grammar and everything right from the beginning. You don't know the slang words or the incorrect grammar, you know, "ain't," and things like that, because you've never been taught that. You're taught the correct thing. So I started, and I progressed very well in English because, I guess, of that, uh, background, of that beginning. And her name was Miss Shafner. [ph] (she laughs)

DANE: And you remember it.

WILENSKY: And it was School Number 9 in Baltimore, School Number 9. And it was right across the street from the cemetery where Edgar Allan Poe was buried. (she laughs) That I found out later, of course.

DANE: You told me about the first day your sister brought you to school.

WILENSKY: Oh, yes. well, they left it to her to take me to school, and after she got me there she didn't know what to do with me. So she took me down to the little girl's room and she sat me in one of the booths and she said, "Now, you stay here till I come back for you." So I stayed. I sat and I sat and I heard, I saw feet going, you know, but I was afraid to move. I didn't know where I was, or where to go. And I suppose it must have been at the first recess break she came down. She must have inquired meanwhile, of a teacher or somebody, told them what the story was, and they must have told her where to go. So, uh, she took me up and got me registered. And, uh, we were both in that same first grade. But since she was three years older than me, she only

went to the fourth grade. Because by that time she was fourteen and a big girl, you know, and she was ashamed to go to school any more among all the little children, such a big girl, so she quit. She quit after four years of schooling. And then she became a registered nurse, too.

DANE: No kidding.

WILENSKY: Yes, she did. She studied and, uh, took the State Board, and passed. Yes, she did.

DANE: Do you remember when you were a kid and couldn't speak English, if the other kids ever picked on you in any way, or were you accepted right away?

WILENSKY: I don't remember anybody picking on me. I remember, uh, oh, one time somebody pulled my curls. I had curls, and somebody pulled my curls, but I don't think that's picking on me. And my sister lifted me up and carried me away from it. My sister was a very devoted person. She was always like a mother to me. We had a relationship almost like no other. She really, she died about 1968, so I've got a lot of her things, a lot of her, but, uh, she, of course, at fourth grade, she didn't have much of an education,

she just barely knew how to read and write and, uh, she got a job in Sunnaborne's, which was the factory.

I guess the war was on then, by that time. And, um, they, they manufactured uniforms. So she became a seamstress in that, uh, factory. So that's what she did.

DANE: Wow. You were telling me in school that you learned, some of the first words that you learned.

WILENSKY: (she laughs) Well, I don't know what the other words were, but I remember an episode where, uh, there was a boy, and I remember his name was Matthew, sitting across the aisle from me, and I slipped him a note that said, "I love you." Where I learned that, or how, I don't know. But, uh, and the teacher saw me passing it to him and she took it away from me, read it out loud to the class. I don't know how many understood it, even, because they were all foreigners. And then, for punishment, she made me sit in the kneehole under her desk, you know, where there's a kneehole under the desk. And she made me sit there. And I had a good time here. I sat there, made faces, you know. (she laughs)

DANE: And then you became older, you learned English.

WILENSKY: I learned English, and I went through what they call now Junior High. At that time it wasn't, it was called the Advanced School, you know. From the sixth grade you went there. Certain pupils were picked. I skipped one grade, anyways, I remember. So it didn't take me the same length of time. And, uh, so they sent me to this advanced school and, when I graduated from that I was eligible for second year of high school, but I never went. I never went to high school.

DANE: Because you had to work, or . . .

WILENSKY: Well, I guess so. We were poor, we needed money. I was about sixteen then. And I was old enough to, to go to work. So I got a job and went to work. And, uh . . .

DANE: When did you become a nurse? What job did you take?

WILENSKY: Well, I became a nurse when I was about twenty. But, uh, in the meantime, there is, what's the May Company there now, used to be Bernheimer's Department Store. I got a job as assistant timekeeper somehow, I don't

know. But I got a job as assistant timekeeper, and I did that until suddenly somebody said to me why don't I go to business school and study to be, you know, a stenographer. So I did. I went to Sadler's Business School and when they gave me an examination, you know, first, to see how much I knew, what I knew, they excused me from grammar and English, and all I had to take was typing and shorthand. And what I take, or, what I took was the new Rapid system, which you probably never heard of, but the teacher who taught it was the one who, uh, who, uh, started it. There's a book in the Library of Congress that still has her book in there. Uh, and it is called New Rapid. And I went, I took the course to graduate, it was six months, but I didn't wait. I left after four months. I thought I was able to hold a job. And I did. I got a job. And I worked a while.

DANE: Was it at this point that you studied, tell me about your citizenship, because there's a . . .

WILENSKY: Well, citizenship I don't know anything about. My father went and got it. I didn't know anything about it at all until later life, you know, when you learn about these things and find out. But he did that on

his own. He went to night school and he prepared and he learned and, uh, he got his citizenship papers. And, uh, that year, 1920, the law was stil that minor children became naturalized through their father. So that we didn't have to do anything. But, uh, I believe a year later a law was passed. I may be wrong about that, but I think it was just a year later, because I remember saying some time, "Oh, we got in lucky." You know, stuff like that. That each person has to become a citizen in their own right.

DANE: And you were sixteen at the time?

WILENSKY: I was sixteen at the time, so I was still a minor.

DANE: Did it mean anything to you when you, did they come home and say, "Now you're an American citizen?"

WILENSKY: I don't remember anything about it. I don't remember. I don't know. Parent in those days just didn't talk too much to their children and tell them what was going on in the house.

DANE: Was it ever an issue, when you went to get a job, it maybe not have been your citizenship, but at one point did you need . . .

WILENSKY: Well, the only time I needed a birth certificate, to show my age, was when I went to civil service. And, uh, then since I didn't have a birth certificate, in Palestine you didn't get them, uh, the rules say that you have, there are four, uh, ways, things that they'll accept in lieu of a birth certificate. So, uh, well, I finally got it, through writing to the Census Bureau, and, uh, they had taken a Census, what year was it, 1927, no, it was later than that, after I was married, in fact, that census was taken, and it showed that apparently I was listed as a citizen so, that's, so the government accepted that in lieu of a birth certificate, the paper from the Census Bureau.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And I remember you said that your father had signed a statement signing . . .

WILENSKY: Oh, yes. I've got that here, too. Because that was the last option. If you couldn't find anything else, the last option was a statement from your father how old you were, when you were born, and he was on his deathbed with cancer, and I came to him, and I had this typed out for him and, uh, he sat up in bed, and that was the last thing he ever signed. So I've kept it, yeah.

DANE: Will you read the whole thing?

WILENSKY: Yeah..

DANE: From there to there to there.

WILENSKY: Well, it's dated 16 May 1941, because I was called into the service, uh, early, early in May and, uh, so this is dated 16 May too, U.S. Civil Service Commission, Washington, DC. This will certify that my daughter, Mrs. Toba Wilensky, May Miller, was born in Jerusalem, Palestine on December 1, 1904, signed, Aaron Miller. And, uh, signed in my presence, Betsy Smith, witness. But since I never had to use this, why, I just kept it as a reminder.

DANE: And they didn't accept that, though.

WILENSKY: Well, I never sent it. I never had to send it. I never had to send it, because this is the last option, the very last thing they'll accept. And since I had the Census Bureau thing, they accepted that.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. When you came over did you bring, besides this, did you bring a lot of things from

Palestine? Do you remember what you brought?

WILENSKY: Well, I know my mother packed like, like a bride with a trousseau, she had, had a dressmaker in the house sewing things, and I know she bought up a lot of household things and, uh, she brought them with her. Now, what all they were, I don't know, I don't remember. But, uh, since she's gone and my sister's gone, what was left fell to me and I have just this one Turkish towel, and it really is Turkish. A Turkish towel, because it comes from Palestine, from the old Palestine. So I came here in 1912 and, uh, I could see that through the wastings it's probably gotten very thin, but I think I saw the crescent, the half moon, up here, see. The designer's half moon and stars, which is the Arabic, shall I say, logo. (she laughs)

DANE: The national symbol.

WILENSKY: The national symbol. That's right.

DANE: And it's got patterns of stars . . .

WILENSKY: Stars and half moons throughout. So, while it was yellow, I remember looking at it and there were still

little bits of yellow somewhere. Of course, when I got it, and I realized what a relic it was, I stopped using it and I've kept it this way.

DANE: And what's going to happen to it?

WILENSKY: Well, any one of my grandchildren that wants it. They'll divide up the loot after I'm gone. (she laughs)

DANE: It's wonderful. It's amazing.

WILENSKY: You can see that you don't get this in a. You've never seen one like this in America.

DANE: How did you come to find out, this was something that you'd always used, and then one day you said . . .

WILENSKY: Well, after my sister died she, you know, she had it, and when I cleaned out her things I came across this and I said, "Oh, well, yes, I know what this is." So I took it home and kept it. (she laughs)

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Did you ever, since most of your life you've grown up as an American, I mean, you became one when you were sixteen, but you came really when you were eight, have you ever thought about what

it means to be an American, as opposed to if you'd stayed in Palestine?

WILENSKY: Well, I'm glad I, I was always glad I became an American. I married a man who was born in New York City and, uh, and I appreciated, as I grew older, you know, you don't think of things when you're young, but as you get older and you appreciate what has value and what it has meant to you uh, naturally, I do think about these things. Take things out and look at them once in a while and, uh, want to pass them on. And, uh, one thing about me is I talk a lot to my grandchildren. Always have. In Jewish it's called Bubba meisis. Bubba is grandmother and meisis is stories, so that means Grandma's stories. And I've told them, I say, "Now, I know you get sick of me talking to you and telling you this and that." I said, "I'm doing it because I know now that about everybody in my family's gone, and a question comes up I have nobody to ask. So I'm laying all this on you right now so that you'll remember. And if something comes up you'll say, 'Oh, Bubba said this and Bubba said that.'" I said, "So, uh, that's why I'm doing it." Of course, I'm a chatty Anne anyway.

(she laughs)

DANE: Have you ever been back to Israel?

WILENSKY: No, we've never gone back. When Israel was declared a state, my husband and I did go up to the Israeli embassy and, uh, celebrated, like, as they did, dancing and singing and, you know, and I loved those Jewish dances that they do in circles, you know. I guess we used to do that. But we never went back because my husband was afraid to fly. He wasn't too well a man and, uh, so I said, well, I was there when Tel Aviv was starting to build and I remember, uh, we used to go to the beach a lot, you know. And, uh, the ocean was right there, we used to go there. And I said there's so much being shown now in movies and television like, what was this, Masada, you know, and all those things, some places. I can't say I remember them, but they're familiar to me. But, uh, I said, well, of course, seeing it in person is a different story, but we just never got around to it.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Do you think that you brought back any traditions of, of Arab nature or of Russia nature with you when you came, when you came back?

WILENSKY: Well, Russian nature I wouldn't know because, uh, no, uh, I don't know of anything in particular. I know in Arabic they call ice cream booza. (she laughs) That I remember. They used to go around with a truck like they do here, with a little truck. Booza, booza, and that's ice cream. (she laughs) And, uh, I'll think of that once in a while, you know. These things come back to you in little flashes and, uh, but, uh, as I say, having left at the age of eight, uh, and, and not being in the city, having a real roots, you know, settled there, I really have not much of memories about that place. I know we used to, uh, as I said, we used to travel to the larger places for the holidays to be with friends and, uh, we'd carry food to them and so I know when we came to this country we traveled through Gaza. That I remember. And sands were drifting. And we were told, I remember, whoever, I guess, our Arabian driver, pointed out a place, and he said, "This used to be a town at one time, but it's all covered with sand now." Must have had a sandstorm. Little things like that, you know, but I can't tell you anything, actually, about, uh, the city and the city life and so forth.

DANE: And then, this is always my last question, um, and with you, again, being so young, it may not be applicable at all, but do you remember when you first thought of yourself as an American rather than a little girl from another country that's come to live here?

WILENSKY: Well, I don't remember specifically. I think until after I was married and my husband, he was such a patriot, he was, uh, he loved this country, he had had three enlistments in service and, uh, he used to always say, "You're first and my country's second." And so from that I began to take pride, you know, in being an American and so forth. But, uh, I don't remember really thinking about it seriously.

DANE: And actually there's one more question. Just because you did have tears on Ellis Island, did anyone ever refer to it to you, your parents or anything, as the Island of Tears, or say it in Yiddish? There used to be an expression . . .

WILENSKY: They probably did that, uh, maybe not in my hearing or it, or it, uh, didn't make an impression on me at that time. Yes, because all, all my aunts, you know,

my mother's sisters and all, they all came over the same way and they all, I guess, had their stories to tell, and so forth. But they were supposedly Americanized by the time we got here, you know. I don't know how long they had been here but, uh, because they were all married in Russia. Most of them were married in Russia, but the children were born here, I think. Yeah. So, uh, no. I think of, naturally, I think of it when I see something special doing or I go to some, uh, uh, like I'll stand in front of the Russian embassy sometimes, you know, let the Jews go, and things like that. But, uh, otherwise I really, uh, grew up American. I grew up American without thinking about it. (she laughs)

DANE: I think that's great. That's good. This is the end of side two, with Toba Wilensky, number 074. It's November 13th at 5:00 PM.