

KM-29

HARRY PORTNOY AND BEVERLY PORTNOY

BIRTH DATE: NOVEMBER 16, 1897 (HARRY)

INTERVIEW DATE: JANUARY 23, 1994

RUNNING TIME: 33:10

INTERVIEWER: KATE MOORE

RECORDING ENGINEER: ANNA DAMMERT

INTERVIEW LOCATION: LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 10/1994

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 3/1995

RUSSIA, 1898

AGE 6 MONTHS

SHIP NAME NOT RECALLED

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Beverly Portnoy is the daughter of Mr. Portnoy. She is present during the interview and interjects with information occasionally. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 3/14/1995.

MOORE: Good morning. This is Kate Moore for the National Park Service. Today is the 23rd of January 1994. I'm in Las Vegas, Nevada at the home of Harry Portnoy, who came from Odessa in 1898 when he was six months old. Why don't you begin by giving us your full name and date of birth, please?

HARRY: 1897, November 16th.

MOORE: And what is your full name?

HARRY: Harry Portnoy.

MOORE: Okay. And where were you born?

HARRY: In Odessa.

MOORE: Odessa, Russia. And what size town, at that time? You don't know, okay. What was your father's name?

HARRY: Max.

MOORE: Max. And what was his occupation?

HARRY: Tailor.

MOORE: He was a tailor. Describe what he looked like.

HARRY: Well, he wasn't bad looking. He was the usual run of humanity.

MOORE: What color hair and eyes did he have as a young man?

HARRY: Well, it was black or brown, I don't . . .

MOORE: Blackish-brown hair, and what about eyes? Do you know his eye color? A lot of people don't remember their fathers. How tall was he?

HARRY: About five-six.

MOORE: About five-six, okay. And what about his personality and temperament? How would you describe your father?

HARRY: Even-tempered.

MOORE: Even-tempered. And what was his character like?

HARRY: Even-tempered.

MOORE: Okay. And is there a story about your father that you associate with your childhood, anything you can tell us, an anecdote about him?

HARRY: Well, he was not happy with his marriage.

MOORE: Uh-huh. And so when he wasn't happy with his marriage, what did he do?

HARRY: Well, he left town.

MOORE: He left town. How old were you then?

HARRY: Well, I think I was about seventeen or so.

MOORE: You were about seventeen years old. What about your mother? What was her name?

HARRY: Etta.

MOORE: Etta? How do you spell that?

HARRY: E-T-T-A.

MOORE: Okay. And what was her maiden name?

HARRY: Katz.

MOORE: Katz. K-A-T-Z?

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: And what was her occupation? She stayed home. She was a housewife?

HARRY: Yeah.

MOORE: And what did she look like?

HARRY: Well, she looked like a young lady.

MOORE: Was she beautiful? Was she, how did you think about her?

HARRY: Well, she was four.

MOORE: She was four. And what about her personality and temperament?

HARRY: I can't tell you.

MOORE: Was she strict, or was she . . .

HARRY: Fair.

MOORE: She was fair, too. What were her chores around the house? What did she do at home? How did she occupy herself?

HARRY: Cooking.

MOORE: And cleaning, too? Now, how many brothers and sisters did you have?

HARRY: Three sisters.

MOORE: All right. Could you name your, the children in your family in their birth order, who was the oldest to the youngest?

HARRY: Ida, Jeanette and Tilly.

MOORE: Tilly. Now, were they older or younger than you?

HARRY: Younger.

MOORE: Okay. How many years younger was Ida than you were, than you are?

HARRY: About two years.

MOORE: Okay. And the next sister?

HARRY: About two years.

MOORE: And the third sister?

HARRY: I would say two years.

MOORE: So everybody was two years apart, just about. Okay. Now, do you have, did your parents ever tell you why you came to the United States?

HARRY: To escape pogroms.

MOORE: To escape pogroms. Did they tell you any stories that happened before you were born? Did they ever tell you anything that happened back home? Did they talk about the Cossacks?

HARRY: Not that I remember.

MOORE: And how do you know, what did they, did they ever say anything about Ellis Island? Did they say they did come through Ellis Island.

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: They told you about Ellis Island.

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: Do you know the name of the ship that you came in?

HARRY: No.

MOORE: Do you know where you came, what port you, okay. Now, from Ellis Island, where did you go?

HARRY: To Boston.

MOORE: To Boston. Now, who decided to come to America first?

HARRY: My dad.

MOORE: And how much earlier did he come?

HARRY: He came a year before we did. That would be about seventy . . .

BEVERLY: About 1896.

MOORE: Yeah. 1896, right. Okay. Now, he came here, and what did he do here?

HARRY: Tailor.

MOORE: He came as a tailor.

HARRY: Yeah.

MOORE: And did he know anyone here?

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: Who did he know?

HARRY: He had a cousin relationship with a fellow named Stone.

MOORE: Stone, surname Stone, last name.

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: And this fellow Stone, whom he knew before he came, what did he do?

HARRY: Furniture.

MOORE: He was in furniture. So did your, how did your father pay for his voyage?

HARRY: He paid, they were committed so much a month, to pay so much a month.

MOORE: To whom did he pay?

HARRY: I couldn't tell you.

MOORE: But you know that he paid per month a certain amount of money to come here.

HARRY: Yeah.

MOORE: Afterwards, or before?

HARRY: Afterwards.

MOORE: So someone paid his way, and he had to pay it back in monthly installments. Is that correct?

HARRY: That's right. That's right.

MOORE: Okay. And so he came here a year before to be a tailor where?

HARRY: In Boston.

MOORE: In Boston. And is that where Stone was?

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: And Stone, was he a real cousin, or was he . . .

HARRY: A regular cousin.

MOORE: All right. Now, Stone, the cousin Stone, where was he from? The same village?

HARRY: I couldn't tell you.

MOORE: Did you ever see that cousin in your life?

HARRY: Oh, yes.

MOORE: Once you got over here.

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: Okay. So did your mother ever talk about what she had to leave behind or anything? Or what they packed?

HARRY: No.

MOORE: No. Did she talk about the voyage of the ship, or the conditions on the ship?

HARRY: No.

MOORE: Never mentioned to your memory. All right. When you got here then, where did your parents go in Boston? Do you know the address?

HARRY: No.

MOORE: All right. What first dwelling do you remember? What house do you remember first?

BEVERLY: Was it Dorchester? Was it Manapan?

HARRY: No, Boston.

BEVERLY: It was in Boston proper.

MOORE: In the city of Boston.

BEVERLY: Yes.

MOORE: Okay. So what did your mother do then when she got there? She was a housewife, or was she working?

HARRY: A housewife.

MOORE: Okay. Tell me a bit about your life as a child there. Tell me a little bit about Boston at that time, and you're ninety-six years old . . .

HARRY: It was terrible.

MOORE: It was terrible?

HARRY: Yeah. No food, and we struggled very hard.

MOORE: And what language did you speak with your parents?

HARRY: English or Jewish.

MOORE: English or Jewish, right. And your parents spoke to each other in Jewish?

HARRY: Jewish or English.

MOORE: Jewish or English, right. Do you ever remember, ever remember learning English?

HARRY: No.

MOORE: It just sort of happened. Okay. So you say it was really difficult with no food. Did your father have enough work?

HARRY: No.

MOORE: So he had a hard time finding work, enough work.  
HARRY: Yeah.

MOORE: And how did you get by then? Did you have clothing  
and . . .

HARRY: Well, it was difficult.

MOORE: How, tell us what you mean by difficult, though.  
Describe it a little bit. You're old enough so that a  
lot of people wouldn't know these things.

HARRY: No food, no rent. It was difficult.

MOORE: What, did you have enough clothing?

HARRY: No.

MOORE: Did you have shoes?

HARRY: No.

MOORE: Shoes?

BEVERLY: With holes in them with cardboard in them, and that was  
when he was out selling papers at seven years old.

MOORE: So you went to work when you were, or I should say did  
you go to work when you were a child?

HARRY: Yeah.

MOORE: How young were you when you went to work?

HARRY: About four or five.

MOORE: You went to work at four or five years old. And what  
did you do?

HARRY: Sell papers.

MOORE: So you needed to help the family?

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: And at four or five years old you sold papers. What  
papers? Do you remember the paper you sold?

BEVERLY: The Boston Globe.

MOORE: All right. Yeah. So, you sold papers. Now, who gave  
you that work?

HARRY: The newspapers.

MOORE: So you went down and got newspapers and sold them.

HARRY: Yeah.

MOORE: Okay. What about religious life? You were not religious?

HARRY: No.

MOORE: You have to answer into the microphone because we can't hear your head shaking.

HARRY: I said no.

MOORE: No. ( she laughs ) Okay. And, so, did you go, you didn't go to temple. All right. So how big was the apartment that you lived in when you were younger, that you remember? How big?

HARRY: Just one bedroom, I think.

MOORE: One bedroom. And do you remember how the house was lit? Did you have light? Do you remember anything about the lights, or lamps? No. Do you remember how it was lit, I mean, heated? No. Tell me about school. What school did you go to.

HARRY: I don't remember. I went to a Third Street school, where I last go. That's as far as my education went.

MOORE: Was that a grade school?

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: So you went to a Third Street school, up to what grade, do you remember?

HARRY: On Third Street.

BEVERLY: Third grade?

MOORE: Third grade?

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: Third grade. So you went to school till about nine years old?

HARRY: I don't remember.

MOORE: When you did have food in the house, when did things start getting, did things ever get better?

HARRY: No. They never got better.

MOORE: So you always lived in pretty poor conditions.

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: And you left school after third grade.

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: What did you do then?

HARRY: Sell papers.

MOORE: So you sold papers. Until how old were you when you stopped doing that?

HARRY: Well, I would say about seven or eight.

MOORE: You stopped selling papers at seven or eight. What about your little sisters, did they have to work?

HARRY: No.

MOORE: No. So they basically stayed home.

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: And were you able to make enough money on selling papers to put food on the table?

HARRY: I couldn't tell you.

MOORE: Okay. Now, let's talk when you're a little bit older then. After you left school at nine years old or so, around there, what did you do? You sold papers?

HARRY: Well, I worked in different places.

MOORE: Yeah, you said you started selling papers seven to eight. So which places did you work in, like, for instance?

BEVERLY: Wasn't there a cousin who gave you a job and you lived at his house, a cousin?

HARRY: Uh, I worked for a tailor, a cousin. And I pressed suits.

MOORE: You pressed suits for a tailor. And was that Stone, again?

HARRY: No.

BEVERLY: No, he was in furniture.

MOORE: That's right, Stone was in furniture, that's right.

HARRY: Seidman.

MOORE: Seidman?

HARRY:                   That was his name.

MOORE:           What was his first name? Do you remember? So he got you a job pressing suits at the tailor's. Were you supporting your family then?

HARRY:           Well, whatever I made.

MOORE:           What about the neighborhood in Boston that you lived in then? What was it like?

HARRY:           The West End.

MOORE:           The West End? And what was the atmosphere then? What was it like?

HARRY:           Well, it was a Jewish center.

MOORE:           It was a Jewish neighborhood. And were you able to speak Jewish in that neighborhood, to people?

HARRY:           If you had to.

MOORE:           But basically what did you speak, then, as a language?

HARRY:           I can't remember.

BEVERLY:        English.

MOORE:           English. So you were a tailor. How long did you do, with the tailor, pressing the suits? How long did you do that?

HARRY:                   ( he clears his throat ) Oh, a year or two. I can't remember.

MOORE:           And then what did you do?

HARRY:           I went into medical service.

MOORE:           Into the medical service.

HARRY:           Yes.

MOORE:           What do you mean by that?

HARRY:           I worked for a doctor.

MOORE:           You worked for a doctor. What did you do?

HARRY:           I learned how to give needles, and whatever.

BEVERLY:        He was like an assistant.

HARRY:           I (?) the patient, and whatever was necessary to my life.

MOORE: Um, let me just make sure about the mike here. Okay. So who was the doctor? Do you remember the doctor's name?

HARRY: No.

MOORE: And how old were you then?

HARRY: Oh, I was about eighteen, I think.

MOORE: Eighteen. Between the time you were in the tailor shop, which you said was about a year-and-a-half ago, and the doctor's office, what did you do at that time for work?

HARRY: Well, I was in medical service.

MOORE: What about the Depression? That seems to be one of the times, yeah. What about the Depression?

HARRY: I worked in hospitals.

MOORE: During the Depression.

HARRY: Yes.

BEVERLY: He also was a cleaner. Weren't you in the cleaning business during the Depression? Well, that's when you got together with Mother, you were in the cleaning business. Do you remember clothes?

MOORE: Okay, we'll get to that. All right. Did your parents ever say whether they were, how they felt about coming to the United States? Did they ever comment to you on how they came all the way over here to escape persecution in Russia, and they had a hard time, as you say. Did they ever comment about that to you? Did they ever want to go back, or did they . . .

HARRY: Never wanted to go back.

MOORE: No. Did they ever comment that America was different than what they thought?

HARRY: They liked America.

MOORE: They liked it here. And so they were pretty satisfied for having come.

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: Now, how old were you, now, your mother, you helped support your family. And you said at a certain age your father left home. Did that, tell us a little bit about that. What responsibility did you have then?

HARRY: Whatever I could.

MOORE: So you were doing whatever you could to help the family. Okay. So you worked in hospitals, and then what happened in your life. Tell me a little bit about how, bring me up to the present. Tell me about things that happened in your life, those things you remember.

HARRY: Well, I went from hospitals, ( he clears his throat ) finally worked for Sears-Roebuck about six months, and then I left there. I worked into real estate, and I was successful.

MOORE: When did you start real estate, about how old?

HARRY: ( he clears his throat ) About 1933, I think.

MOORE: So you went into real estate in about 1933, and did you stay in real estate then?

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: For how long?

HARRY: Well, until my wife died.

MOORE: Now, let's back up a little bit. So at what age did you, how did you meet your wife, and at what age did you get married? You skipped the marriage part here. There's something going on in there, so . . .

HARRY: I think we got married in 1930.

MOORE: And how did you meet your wife?

HARRY: I used to be in the cleaning business.

MOORE: And when was that, the cleaning business. How old were you then?

HARRY: Oh, I was about twenty-nine, I think.

MOORE: Uh-huh. And so you were in the cleaning business when you were twenty-nine. And that was before real estate?

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: Okay. And you were in the cleaning business. What type of cleaning business do you mean?

HARRY: Well, I was a driver.

MOORE: A driver? For whom?

HARRY: I couldn't remember.

MOORE: Okay. So you were a driver, and you met your, how did you meet your wife, then?

HARRY: Because I used to pick up their cleaning.

BEVERLY: She had a cleaning store.

MOORE: Oh, she had a cleaning store, and you used to pick up her cleaning. But how did you get from picking up her cleaning to being her husband?

HARRY: Well, her husband died all of a sudden, and I used to be strange as far as women were concerned. I never was interested. So we finally got together, and we married when she was coming along.

BEVERLY: I was born in '32.

MOORE: Your daughter was born in 1932. I see. And so you married. Now, did she have children?

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: How many children did she have?

HARRY: Four children.

MOORE: She had four children. So in 19, by 1932, by, wait a minute, 19 . . .

BEVERLY: '30.

MOORE: '30, you had no children, and by 1932 you had five children.

HARRY: No.

BEVERLY: Yes.

MOORE: Four girls, you inherited four girls.

BEVERLY: No, two boys.

MOORE: Oh, two boys.

BEVERLY: Two boys, two girls, and me.

MOORE: Two boys, two girls. You were single, you met this woman who had four children.

BEVERLY: Yes, widowed.

MOORE: Widowed. And two years later you had a new baby and the four children. That's quite an accomplishment. ( Ms. Moore and Beverly laugh ) Now, when do you think life, well, describe the life then when you were working in real estate?

HARRY: I was fixing buildings, painting, doing all kinds of things on buildings.

MOORE:                   And that's what you were doing?

HARRY:            Yes.

MOORE:            When your daughter was born?

HARRY:            Yes.

MOORE:            And you continued to do that until, you said your wife died. When did your wife die?

HARRY:            In '49.

MOORE:            So from '33 or '32 to '49 you worked in the real estate business. And were those better times for you?

HARRY:            Not too good.

MOORE:            Did you continue to help your mother and sisters?

HARRY:            Naturally.

MOORE:            Yeah. So you not only had your own family, you had two families to take care of. Is that right? And, now, what about, what happened then when your wife died?

HARRY:            Well, I had a difficult times. My property was not paying off. They, I had to pay them to move out, I had to pay them. I had difficult times.

BEVERLY:         He also had a law suit with my sisters and brothers. And it destroyed him financially.

HARRY:            Yes. They sued me. I'm certain I had originally joint tenancy, and there was a fight going on, and I thought they were going to lose so I changed the tenancy law, and put all my properties in my name. That's where I made the big mistake.

MOORE:            Let's see. You thought they were going to lose, so you changed? You changed what? I guess I missed that.

HARRY:            I changed from joint tenancy to ownership.

MOORE:            I see. You changed from joint tenancy to ownership. I see. And they won?

BEVERLY:         Yeah.

HARRY:            The joint tenancy won, and that's where I made the big mistake. I had to settle with my family for five thousand dollars.

BEVERLY:         Which, at that time, was a great deal of money.

HARRY:            And I didn't know how to do it.

BEVERLY: He had to sell the property (?) a financial statement.

HARRY: I had to sell the property to get the five thousand dollars.

MOORE: Now, these were your stepchildren.

BEVERLY: Yes.

MOORE: And what year was this?

BEVERLY: It was 1949.

MOORE: The year that your wife died. Did this sort of break up the family a little bit, this incident?

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: Or, I should say, what did that do to the family unity.

BEVERLY: There was no family unity as far as my father was concerned, they, from day one.

MOORE: All right. So that was a pretty hard time, too, right? So what did you do then in your life?

HARRY: Well . . .

BEVERLY: He went dancing. ( Ms. Moore laughs )

HARRY: I did the best I could in real estate.

BEVERLY: He rebuilt.

HARRY: And that was the final.

MOORE: So from 1949 onwards you went back into real estate again?

HARRY: I was in real estate. I was buying real estate.

BEVERLY: Buying and selling, and building.

MOORE: Buying and selling, and building. I see. Okay. So after that mistake, did anything, did things pick up and get better after that?

HARRY: No. It was very bad.

BEVERLY: Let me clarify something. There was always a difficult cash flow, but he did have the property. So things did get better and he did accumulate. He's just forgetting, you know, he's negative. He's forgetting that things did get better.

MOORE: Okay.

BEVERLY: I left. I disappeared. He didn't have me to take care

of. I was gone for fifteen years.

MOORE: Did you ever remarry then?

HARRY: No.

MOORE: No. And, so, you continued in real estate, buying and selling property. And did this go, tell us more what happened, then, up to the present. When did you stop doing that, or when did you . . .

HARRY: I didn't stop. I just did the best I could.

MOORE: Now, you spoke, you said, with your parents, some Jewish, and you were able, in your neighborhood, if you had to as a child, speak Jewish. Did your children and step-children speak any Jewish?

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: And the wife, who you married, was she also Jewish?

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: Did she speak Jewish?

HARRY: Yes.

MOORE: Did you ever speak together Jewish?

BEVERLY: Yes, yes.

MOORE: No, wait. I will get there. I mean, as a secret language.

HARRY: No.

MOORE: But then how could your children speak it?

HARRY: Well, we were Jews.

MOORE: And were your children religious at all?

HARRY: No.

MOORE: Not one of them.

HARRY: No.

MOORE: Okay. ( Mr. Portnoy sneezes twice ) Okay. Now, you're describing to me a pretty, you say, I'm sitting in an apartment now, it's a beautiful apartment you have here, something must have been okay somewhere in your life. ( Mr. Portnoy almost sneezes again. ) So you must have done something okay.

HARRY: Oh, yes.

MOORE: Why don't you tell us about that?

HARRY: Well, I sold property, and that's how I was able to pay the rent here.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

HARRY: For five years and then I went broke.

BEVERLY: But he's missing a lot in between.

MOORE: ( Mr. Portnoy sneezes ) Now, you describe a life that's pretty hard in the beginning, and you say your parents were pretty happy they came to the United States, how did you feel about being, their decision to come to this country?

HARRY: Wonderful.

MOORE: Do you think, of course it's hypothetical, did you ever think that maybe life would have been better back in Russia?

HARRY: Forget about Russia. Russia is a dead country.

MOORE: So you have no regrets.

HARRY: No.

MOORE: And you feel good about your children growing up here.

HARRY: Yes. ( there is a disturbance with the microphone )

MOORE: Did your parents ever say anything about the Statue of Liberty or seeing any of those things? As far as Ellis Island in itself was concerned you don't remember anything. If you were going to give advice to young people, if you ever thought about it and you wouldn't, but if you were going to today, what would you tell people, young people today?

HARRY: I would tell them to work hard and be busy, and try to make a success.

MOORE: And do you think that this is a country where that can be done?

HARRY: Absolutely.

MOORE: I'd like to thank you on behalf of Ellis Island for helping us.

HARRY: Thank you.

MOORE: And we will send you a copy by the summer, and you'll

become part of our collection then there.

HARRY: Thank you.

MOORE: This is Kate Moore from Las Vegas, Nevada, on the 23rd of January 1994, with Harry Portnoy, signing off for the Ellis Island Oral History Project.