

NPS-136/HALLER and DAVIS

NPS-136

WILMA ASPER HALLER and ROSALIE ASPER DAVIS

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ESTONIA via FINLAND, 1920

AGE 18 and 8

PASSAGE ON "THE IMPERATOR"

RINKER: Okay. I have with me Willa Haller, and Rosalie Davis.

And they came from Estonia, Europe. And they would like to share their experiences with us today about how they came through Ellis Island. When and where were you born?

HALLER: I was born in Estonia in 1901, as the oldest daughter of John Asper, who was a merchant seaman, and he was quite aware of the political situation in Russia and Germany and dissatisfaction in Europe, and he wanted to bring us family in, to United States, because he had traveled in Australia, so he kind of got a job on a ship and left us over there. In a matter of a few years he was going to send for us.

DAVIS: I'm Rosalie Davis, and my father said that when he was working unloading logs in Long View, Washington, or loading, or unloading, he hurt his foot, and it got infected. He was taken to a hospital in Portland, Oregon for treatment. And while he was in the hospital, his ship left. So when he was well enough to leave the hospital, he had the choice of either taking another ship out, or if he had a job he could stay in the United States. One of his, the fellows in his ward was from eastern Oregon, owned a farm up there, and said, "Well, I will hire you, so you can stay in the United States." He took the job, and went on to live in eastern Oregon, and worked in the sawmills there until he established himself and was able to apply for a homestead. Now, what else should . . .

HALLER: Well, then he was able to prove up on the homestead. Meanwhile, the Communists had the Revolution. The czar was killed, and Estonia was overrun by the Russians and there was Communist Revolution. And we were under Communist rule for, oh, about a year or more, and then the Communists went back and the German kaiser took over. And we were there about eight

months under the kaiser's rule. And then it seemed to me like the Communists were driven back, and Estonia had a revolution and became the Republic of Estonia with the help from English Navy who pulled up in the Baltic Sea or Gulf of Finland, and Estonian people that were in the Russian Army all, I don't know what the word would be, they all jumped ship and came home and organized their own army, Estonian Army. And that was the time between 1918 and 1920 where Father was, located us through American Red Cross. We hadn't heard from him for over three years. We had no letters or no correspondence. We didn't know that he was alive, and he didn't know that we were alive until early 1920 when through American Red Cross and some of the attorneys in Tellacasset, Oregon, La Grande, Oregon, were able to locate us and send us letters, and there we started planning, and it took us almost two years that, with letters going back and forth, since Estonia had no American consul and was not recognized by the United States. We were advised to sell everything we had to our friends and relatives, which was twenty-one acres of land and some furniture and things, and move to Finland, and we stayed in Finland for, from June 1920 until October 1920. You

want to go on from there?

RINKER: Well . . .

HALLER: Our life in Eng--, in Newfoundland?

RINKER: Well, we . . .

HALLER: When we had the money enough to live in Finland for three months as sort of a refugee.

DAVIS: Well, we had some help from some Estonian people.

HALLER: Our family there. (disturbance to the microphone)
(break in tape)

DAVIS: The reason we couldn't get out of Finland was that we were required to have extra papers because of the Communist overtake in Russia, to say that we were not Communists, and we had to get those from people here in this country. And, of course, back then, everything had to be done by wireless or letters. So it took quite a while, and we were in Finland for three months. We left Finland for England, and we were vaccinated in London, and on the, from London we went to another port in England, and took the. . .

RINKER: Who got you all out?

DAVIS: And took the oceanliner to New York. Our trip over the ocean was fairly pleasant. We had good, what we thought was good food, because we hadn't had adequate food in Finland. And we had our own cabin, and everything there was pretty good. And then we came to Ellis Island. My impression of Ellis Island was just mobs and mobs of people, all talking in languages I didn't understand. There were so many dark-skinned, dark-haired people. And when my young sister, that I was very fond of, was separated from us, we were all heartbroken. We were afraid that something terrible would happen to her. Of course, she was well-cared for in the hospital, but the language, not knowing the language was a very definite barrier. Now, did you want to say something. (break in tape) I was I think eight or nine years old.

RINKER: And then you, you did not travel alone. You came . . .

DAVIS: No, I didn't. We came with our mother, and she must have had a very difficult time. Of course Wilma, who is here with me, was old enough to help, and so was my sister Alida. Oh, and one thing that I remember definitely about our trip in various different

stations where we were herded around from one place to another, was that Mother had these valuable papers and money, and she was afraid that the money would be stolen. So my sister Freda and I had some dolls in a little basket that we carried between us, and she put all the valuable papers under our doll clothes in the basket, and she would lead the procession with my brother, and then next would come my sister Amelia and Pauline, who were in their early teens, and then my little sister Freda and I (she laughs) with the basket of doll clothes, and Wilma and Alida brought up the rear. And it was their job to see that we didn't drop the doll basket. (they laugh) So that was our usual procedure, and we were very well-organized all the way across all the different places that we stopped. (break in tape)

RINKER: Here we go, it's on. Well, when we left London, we were in London in an apart--, in a big hotel, and we traveled, it was very impressive, on a double-decker bus through London, over London Bridge, which we remember hearing about in our childhood, and we boarded this big oceanliner in Southampton. And we went across whatever that body of water from

Southampton to Cherbourg, France, and we knew about France being very impressed with France. And we didn't, we just stayed on the ship and watched the shore of France. It was beautiful. And then we turned and crossed the ocean to the United States. And, if I can remember, we were en route at least eight or nine days, because the ship was supposed to have been captured by England from Germany during that First World War, and it was evidently a troop ship or something, and it was changed into a passenger ship. And it was, to us it was a luxury liner because we had very good food, all we could eat, again in the commune, big dining rooms. And we landed in, when we got to New York we just were very impressed.

RINKER: What was the name of the ship?

HALLER: Emperor.

RINKER: Emperor.

HALLER: I can write it out. Maybe it's a different way of pronouncing it. It's the Cunard Line.

RINKER: Cunard Line, okay. And then how old were you, Wilma?

HALLER: Well, I was eighteen.

RINKER: You were eighteen.

HALLER: Yeah. I was . . .

RINKER: You came to America because your dad was here?

HALLER: Yeah.

RINKER: And because you came with your whole family.

HALLER: Yeah. We came together, all of us. Dad wanted, it was our dream always to come to America, because there was, life for women was better here than it had been in any other country all over the world. Dad had traveled and seen women were treated nicely and women were respected and, you know, that was the place where he wanted his six daughters to live and marry and be respected women. And he wanted every one of his daughters to have a good education and have a career. And we all did. The two of these here are registered nurses, and college graduates, our nieces and nephews, and I think our life has been fantastically successful. My son, only child, went to college. All of my two sisters . . .

RINKER: What happened to your son?

HALLER: And my son was killed on the Second World War, and that was the only child I had. And he went to Oregon State College. He was a First Lieutenant and a navigator in the B-29. He was killed over Saipan during the Second World War, fighting the Japanese. So that was my price for this freedom to live in this country, that all the rest of the family are able to enjoy the, all the good things that the United States has to offer. Of course, I didn't want him to be sacrificed, but he did, he was. And I'm doing everything that I can in his place, since he wasn't privileged to live. I feel like I'm very lucky that I'm still alive. Everybody says, "Isn't it awful to get old?" But I think it's wonderful. A lot of people don't have the chance.

RINKER: It's beautiful.

HALLER: Yeah. I'm getting a real, (they laugh) editorializing here now. (they laugh)

RINKER: Okay. So why don't you tell about, you know, you were the oldest, and you were behind the pack with the little . . . (they laugh)

HALLER: Well, I was . . .

RINKER: What was Ellis like?

HALLER: My brother, my brother and I were kind of pushy, kind of, Mother depended on us to go looking around and snooping, seeing what's what and where to go and what next. And I think I must have been, but I don't, it was my responsibility, I guess. Well, Ellis Island to us, when we landed, as I said, we were on the same ship, but it was, America was elegant. And then when we were brought here we were frightened for a while. As I said, those iron cages, and there was no one, people that we talked to on the ship, Finn language or Russian language. They disappeared, and we sort of ended up with our language, Estonian language is all we could speak. It's very similar to Finn. There was another one or two ladies that spoke Finn language that were able to be our interpreters and explain a little bit what was going on. They were official. They were just volunteers. They were just other immigrants. But one lady, I remember especially, she was Finn, and she had been living in Chicago, and she was making a trip back to Finland, and had happened to sympathize with us because we could speak a little Finn after living there for a few months. And so she

helped us as far along as Chicago, and then from there on across the United States we were absolutely on our own. And when we were on the train, my mother wanted to, oh, yes, what Ellis Island gave us. When we left, we were given what's called now shopping bags, with the little handles, full of food. We had white bread and sausages and cheese, and crackers and apples and oranges. And that . . .

RINKER: They gave it to you, or was it bought?

HALLER: They gave us, I don't know whether we bought them, or whether they gave us.

RINKER: Well, anyway . . .

HALLER: Several of us had these bags. And that was the only food that we had going on this day coach on a train across the United States, because we didn't go in the dining room. We had day, a day car with these red, plush seats. And we took several of them . . .

RINKER: Before we get on the train, why don't you talk about your sister getting the rash and you having to stay and being here.

HALLER: Oh, I see.

RINKER: What about the dormitory? You told me about the wood chippings in the . . .

HALLER: Well, yes, as we went through we were, like I said, we were constantly, people come up to us and look at our tags and motion come this way or that way, and we followed. And there was doctors, I imagine, and the nurses, and people in totally uniform, told us to go this way and go that way.

RINKER: Were you afraid the people in here?

HALLER: No, no. We weren't afraid. We weren't afraid. The only time my mother was frightened was when that little girl was taken away, and we thought that she was going to be sent back, because there were some other people that were crying because some of their people were sent back. And she was, we were all upset because we thought she was going to be sent back, and where would she go? Of course, my mother had brothers back there, and we would have had to some way contact and tell them that our younger sister was returned, for them to look after her, but we didn't need to, so we were just sitting in those, that dorm, and went into the dining room. And, of course, there must have

been food that we ate, because I remember there was white bread, and there was dark bread, and there was milk, and there was food. Evidently we weren't hungry, but we wouldn't eat any of those corn chips, corn chips, what do you call it, corn flakes, because my mother said that they were wood shavings.

(they laugh) And we didn't taste them, evidently, and I don't know why we were so scared, because they looked . . .

RINKER: I mean, I mean like today . . .

HALLER: You'd get all those slivers in your stomach from those wood pieces. And then the milk, I think we must have tasted them, because I remember pouring that thick milk on this, these supposed wood chips, tasting them, and that milk was thick and kind of funny-tasting, and I didn't know what it was until after I got married and settled down and found out it was canned milk, and now I use it all the time. (they laugh)

RINKER: Yeah, really!

HALLER: Progress, huh? My experience in Ellis Island was, it wasn't horrifying or terribly, it was good.

RINKER: And she had the rash.

HALLER: Yeah.

RINKER: What did they say it was?

HALLER: Well, they didn't . . .

RINKER: Did you ever see her for the week that you were here?

DAVIS: Yes, you did, yes, you did.

HALLER: No, we never. (to her sister) Did you go visiting?
I didn't, no.

DAVIS: Wilma may not remember, but I think through some Finnish people, it was always the Finnish people that we communicated with. Found out that she was in the hospital, and I believe Wilma or Alida or some older member of the family went to the hospital to see her.

HALLER: I don't remember that. It must have been Mother and Alida.

DAVIS: Yes. They said that she had been doing nothing but crying. That she wouldn't eat. And, so, when she knew that we were still waiting for her, but then she started eating. And as far as her hands getting

better, they were not completely healed, because I remember the lady that helped us arrange things had to get some special salve for it. So it must have been an eczema or some, uh, irritation rash and not anything contagious. Had it been something contagious, we would all have had it, because we definitely were very close together. (disturbance to the microphone) (break in tape) All our papers were very thoroughly gone over in Finland, and we had received these extra papers from our father stating that we were not Communists. And so we had all the important papers we needed, and we didn't have any problems with that at all in Ellis Island. It was only the rash on our sister's hands.

HALLER: Yeah. And we also had that Dad was already a citizen and getting his family over here.

DAVIS: And also our father had already taken out his final citizenship papers, so technically we were probably already citizens of the United States, because the wife of a citizen and all his minor children were automatically citizens at that time, and we were . . .

RINKER: 1920?

HALLER: 1920, and we were all underage.

RINKER: Okay. (music can be heard in the background) As a newcomer, besides, the food, the wood chippings and the canned milk, as a newcomer to America what do you remember?

DAVIS: What do we remember? I don't know of any . . .

RINKER: You mentioned a little earlier about the Statue. Did you like . . .

HALLER: Oh, yeah. Well, that shore was just like what we'd heard, the golden shore, like the poem in here says, it was just like arriving. My mother had preached us all these years to be good and decent so that you can go to America, and here was America, and we were here. It was just kind of an emotional feeling. I felt kind of peculiar, like saying like you go to heaven, and we are here, we are in heaven. And, like you said, we hope, we didn't expect actually the streets to be lined with gold but we thought all of our troubles were over. All we had to do was just get on the train and go to Father, and the thing that, oh, that impressed us with the United States, maybe not with Ellis Island, but the United States, Dad had

proved up on a homestead of, was it a hundred and eighty acres?

RINKER: So it was the 1862 Homestead Act.

HALLER: And that was a, that was a lot of land. Only the barons in Europe in Estonia had that much land. We had twenty-one acres, and having our father be such a landowner, we just thought we were going to have servants and everything was going to be glorious, that we wouldn't have to work. (Ms. Rinker laughs) And, of course, when we got there, we all had to go to work. And so all these years we had wanted to come to see the Ellis Island, and we were so happy that we are successful.

RINKER: When, when you came, you worked on your father's farm in Oregon?

DAVIS: Yes.

RINKER: And then talking about settling in Oregon.

DAVIS: Well, when we got there we were a little bit taken back that all this land wasn't all that great. In Oregon at that time, that was sagebrush and very little of the land was cleared. He did have another

place that was a little bit bigger. But what bothered us more than anything else was that we were isolated.

Our nearest neighbor was half a mile away, and on the other side it was over two miles. We were accustomed to living in villages, very close together. And Estonia is a green land with, it's quite a ways north.

In fact, to us, when we went to New Brunswick just last week, it reminded us very much of Estonia, the same kind of countryside as they had over there. Lots of water and lakes. Of course, Estonia was very densely populated. We lived in villages close together, and had very small places. But, and then Father, the very next year some fellow came by and I don't know if it was the next year or the year after that, and offered him a job working on shares on the larger place. And we moved from the little cabin that he had by a creek, without any running water or anything, to this nice house that had hot and cold running water, a flush toilet and a bathtub. Such unheard of luxuries! (they laugh)

HALLER: And it was a two-story building.

DAVIS: Oh, and it was a two-story house, and we even had separate bedrooms for us, (they laugh) for each two

girls. By that time Wilma was already married. And we, of course, all started school not knowing English, but picked it up fairly fast. And what else was I going to say? This, oh, yes. The fellow that, we rented the farm for was very fair and just, and we got part of the stock when he sold the place and we had to move. We had a good start with cows, and we were able to rent another place on those same terms, and gradually we got, made a headway. But, milk cows, and raised stocked.

FEMALE VOICE OFF MIKE: They had milk cows and milking machines.

DAVIS: Yes. And ended up with, my brother finally ended up owning quite a bit of property in eastern Oregon and raised beef cattle.

FEMALE VOICE OFF MIKE: He had three thousand acres . . .

DAVIS: Yes.

FEMALE VOICE OFF MIKE: He had six thousand acres and his cattle.

DAVIS: That is before he died. And we all went to school, to a country school, a two-room schoolhouse. And from

there we went to a small town high school. The two oldest, Wilma and our sister Alida, got married before they went to high school. And four others, Pauline and Amelia and myself and Freda, we graduated from a small town, a high school. I went in nurse's training in Portland, in St. Vincent's Hospital, the same hospital that my father had been in.

FEMALE VOICE OFF MIKE: Wow.

DAVIS: And finished my nurse's training in 1934, then worked for a while and was married. I have two daughters, and when they were old enough I went back to work part time and retired the seven, eight years ago from nursing. Both of my daughters went to Oregon State University and are, the oldest is a graduate, graduated in the School of Pharmacy. She lives in Fairbanks, Alaska, is married and has two sons, twelve and eight. My youngest daughter graduated from the School of Dietetics, took her dietetic interning at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. She now lives in Walnut Creek, California, has a son aged three. Her husband is a computer scientist in the Bay area. (disturbance to the microphone)

RINKER: Do you want to say something? (disturbance to the microphone)

HALLER: What we had heard about America was that it was the land of opportunity, and everybody here had money. Of course, a part of our idea was that you just sort of had money without any effort. We didn't really realize that you had to work for it. And, of course, the opportunity is here, and anybody that really tries and works hard can make a go of it. But as far as Ellis Island was concerned, we had not heard anything about it and, in fact, the young man downstairs asked me what I thought of the Statue of Liberty when I first saw it. Well, I didn't think anything of it because I hadn't heard of it. (they laugh) As far as I was concerned, it was just another statue sitting there. (she laughs) And a rather big one, but just a statue. (they laugh)

DAVIS: Well, living in Finland for three months we had seen statues.

HALLER: Yes, and when we were in Finland for three months, they had some beautiful statues looking over the rivers and we thought, "Well, so what? It's just a

statue."

DAVIS: In America everything's big, so it had the biggest statue.

HALLER: Now, should I say something about some of the other grandchildren?

RINKER: If you would like to, yeah.

HALLER: Now, our sister Pauline, oh, yes. Our sister Alida is . . .

DAVIS: Next to me.

HALLER: It was next to Wilma. She had a son, has a son and a daughter and, in Portland. And the son has four sons and a daughter. They live in Oregon in around the Salem area.

FEMALE VOICE OFF MIKE: (?) Oregon.

HALLER: And the daughter has two sons and a daughter. Well, I had that reversed, a daughter and two sons. The daughter is the oldest. And they're all working, and everyone has done well. Well, none of us are actually wealthy, but I will say we all are self-supporting, and I think we have had, contributed a little bit to

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the country, I hope. None of us have been on welfare
or relief, so that's something. (tape ends abruptly
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